The Paris Review

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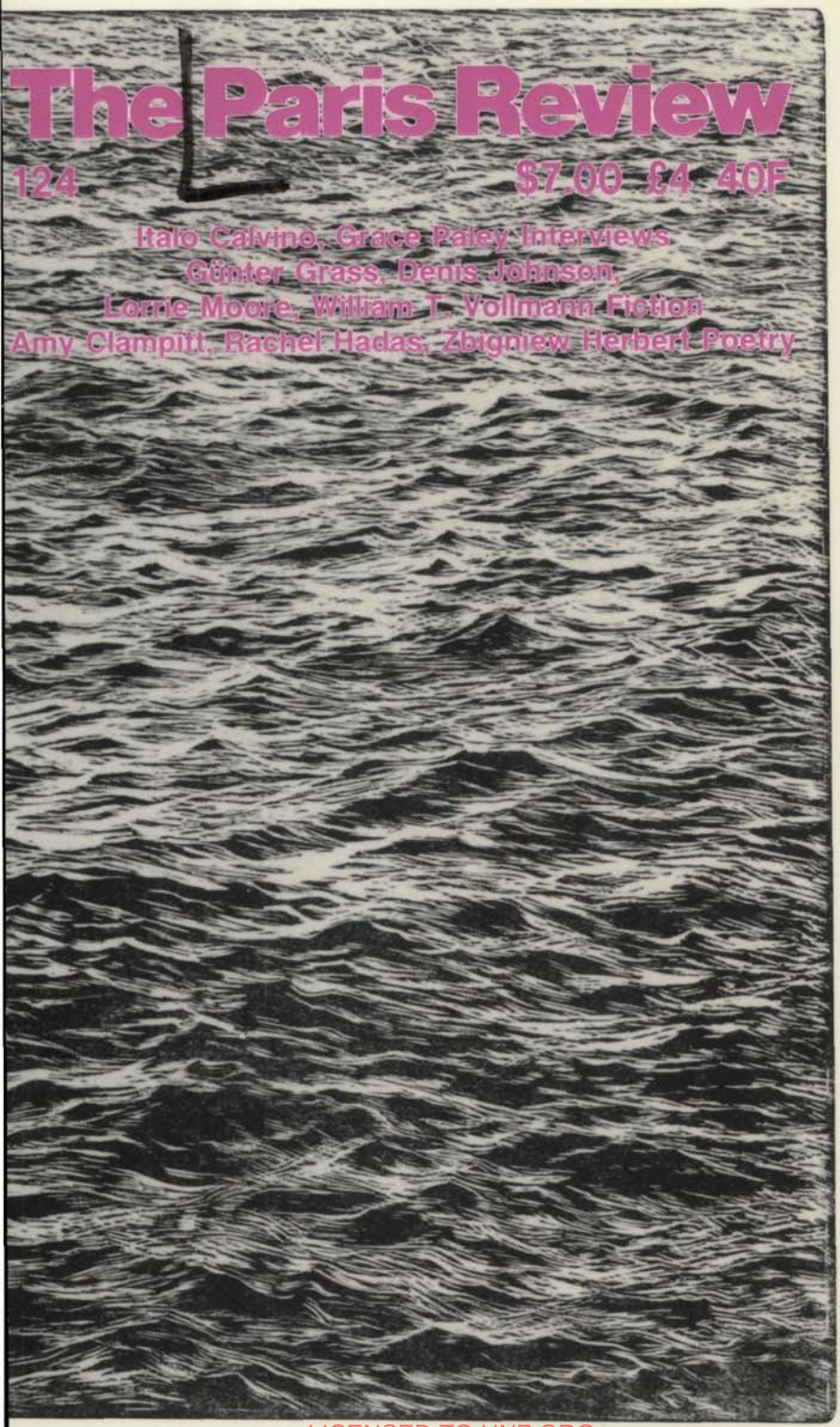

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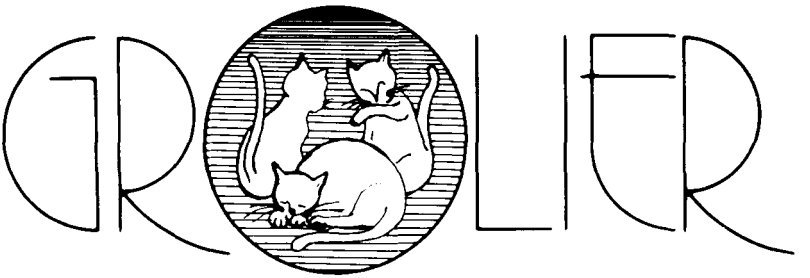

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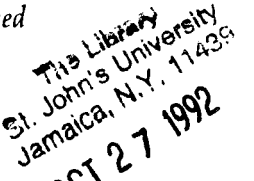

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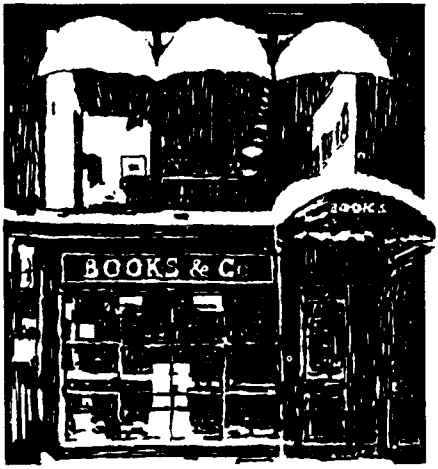

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—Gustave Flaubert,
in a letter, 1858

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Terry Wolverton
A Whisper in the Veins

Bravely, she speaks first. "What is it, Greg? What is it you want to tell me?" I see in her face a determination to hear whatever it is, and I love her fiercely for this.

Cathie Beck
Español

There we stood, the two of us shoulder to shoulder, our arms spread wide, our mouths open and yelling like hungry baby birds, our butts dancing back and forth. Sometimes when we really got going, we would turn circles on the sidewalk and chant in unison.

Jack Holland
The Yard

Now I felt tight and uncomfortable in my new suit. Death had changed everything.

Eileen McGuire
Inhale, Exhale

I always pick the restaurant when we meet for dinner, usually a more obscure one than this, to broaden Henry's mind. Henry the Dull, Henry the Good.

Mary Ellis
Wings

Feeling the coldness of the sheets at the spooky end of the bed, he bent his legs and curled his toes. Since James left, he worried about the safety of his feet so close to where *something* could reach up from underneath the bed and grab them.

Ed Weyhing
How Do You Know?

What if the child is crying again. Is it playing? It is hurt? Is it afraid? Is it in trouble? How do you know? On television they tell children to cry. Holler and scream and cry, so someone will come.

A. Manette Ansay
The Wallet

The wallet is lying there on the counter, well worn and smooth, vulnerable as an infant. It startles him; he blinks, as if he's just seen something he shouldn't. Then he slips it into his pocket, neatly, as though he'd been doing that sort of thing for years.

Joyce Thompson
First Day of School

See here? I'm gonna be a mess of bruises. It's too late to put ice on this eye. He just went crazy, you know? And Tiffy with her hair half braided, she's gonna be late to school. Come here, baby. Mama's sorry. And on your first day, too.

Janice Rosenberg
Chance of a Lifetime

She makes an appointment for the following Tuesday. By then the Renaldis may have won their million dollars. She doesn't tell Flo about them. Her sister would think she was crazy, talking about people from a game show.

Stephen Dixon
Many Janes

I meet and marry another woman named Jane, I don't look for them with that name, just the only kind I seem to find, she dies, another woman named Jane, Jane Jane Jane, my three Janes, I have four daughters altogether with them, the fourth is named Janine but after her mother dies I call her Jane.

Susan Burmeister
Pressing Tight

I went for you, all-out went for you, told everyone about you from day one, made you my life—lock, stock, and barrel. And I threw away the key. You try to tell me you want me out of your life, but you see, I'm in your life. No, that's not even it. I'm in you. I'm you. It's like it's me wearing that purple sweater right now.

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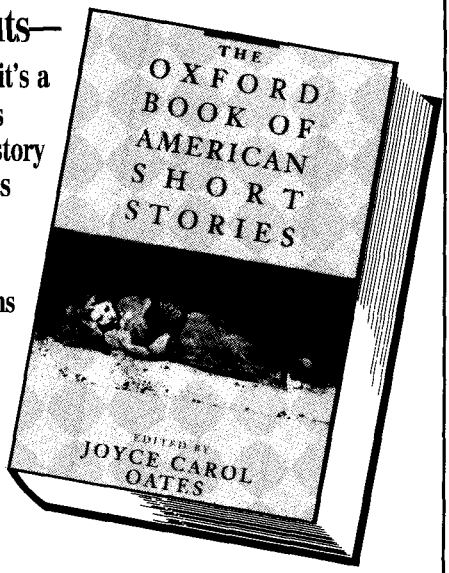

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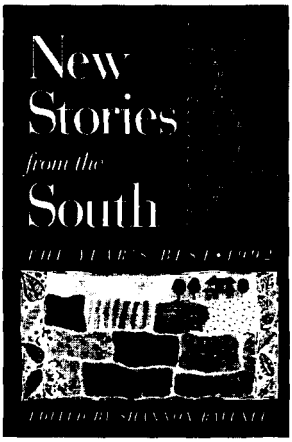

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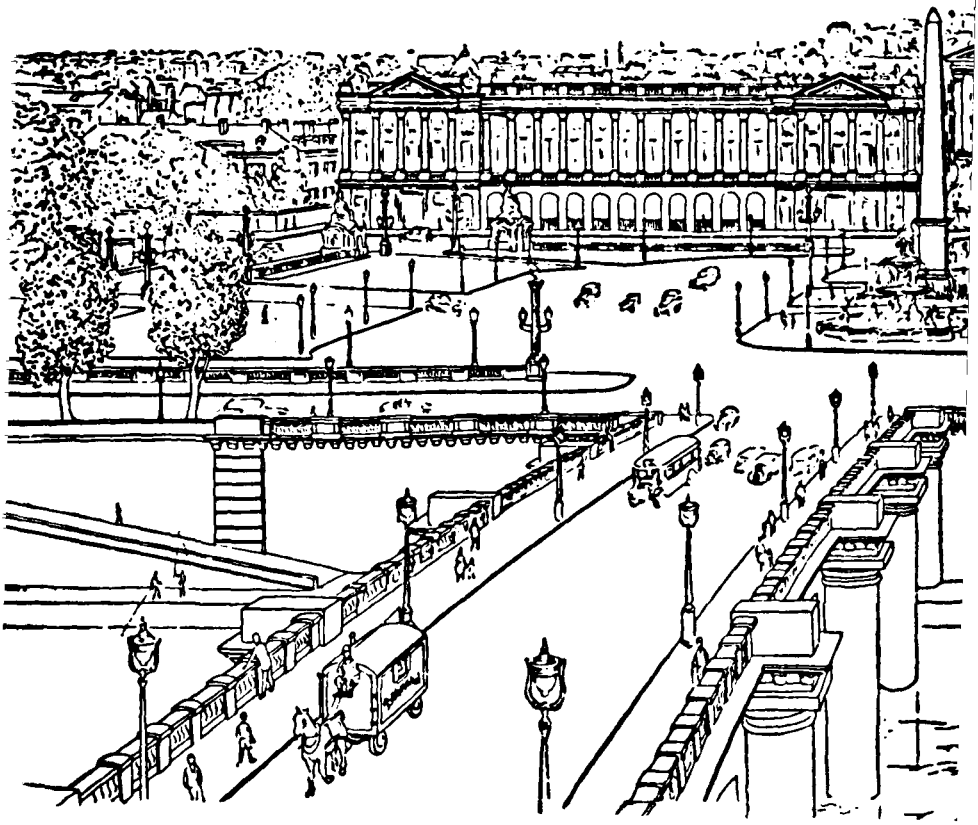

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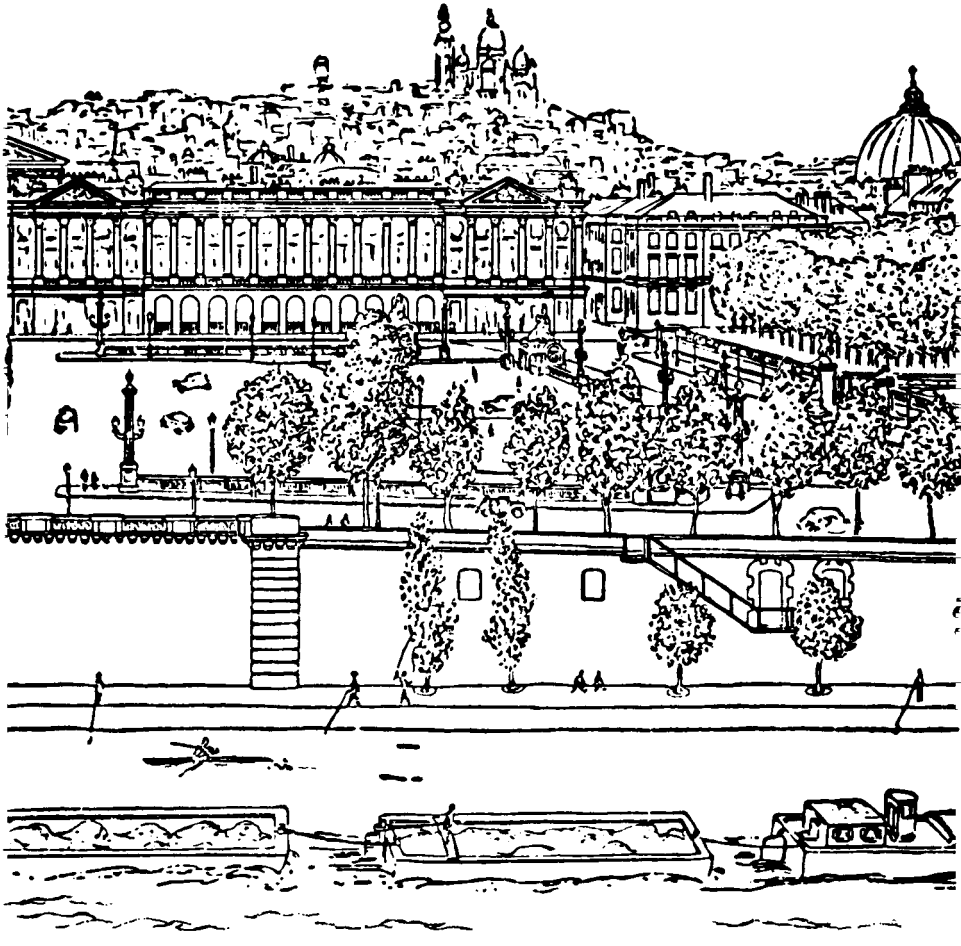

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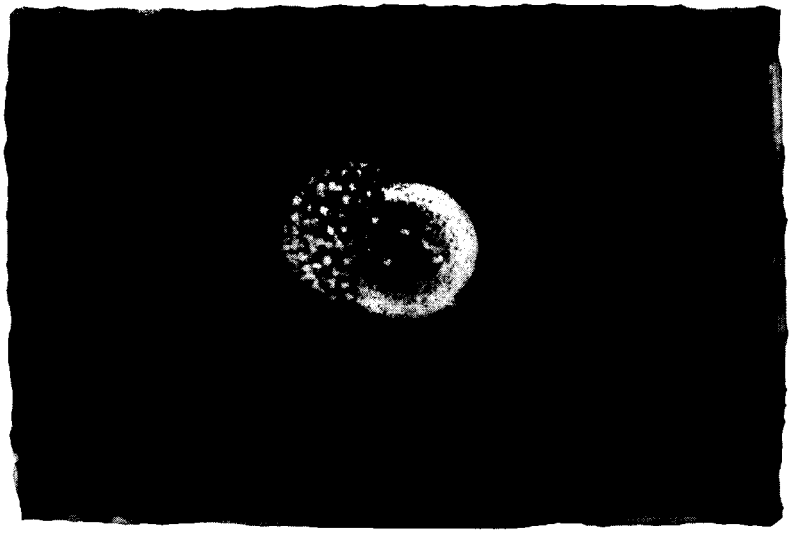

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Beverly Home

Denis Johnson

Sometimes I went during my lunch break into a big nursery across the street, a glass building full of plants and wet earth and feeling of cool dead sex. During this hour the same woman always watered the dark beds with a hose. Once I talked with her, mostly about myself and about, stupidly, my problems. I asked her for her number. She said she had no phone, and I got the feeling she was purposefully hiding her left hand, maybe because she wore a wedding ring. She wanted me to come by and see her again sometime. But I left knowing I wouldn't go back. She seemed much too grown-up for me.

And sometimes a dust storm would stand off in the desert, towering so high it was like another city—a terrifying new era approaching, blurring our dreams.

I was a whimpering dog inside, nothing more than that. I looked for work because people seemed to believe I should look for work, and when I found a job, I believed I was happy about it because these same people—

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counselors and Narcotics Anonymous members and such—seemed to think a job was a happy thing.

Maybe, when you hear the name "Beverly," you think of Beverly Hills—people wandering the streets with their heads shot off by money.

As for me, I don't remember ever knowing anybody named Beverly. But it's a beautiful, a sonorous name. I worked in an O-shaped, turquoise blue hospital for the aged bearing it.

Not all the people living at Beverly Home were old and helpless. Some were young but paralyzed. Some weren't past middle age but were already demented. Others were fine, except that they couldn't be allowed out on the street with their impossible deformities. They made God look like a senseless maniac. One man had a congenital bone ailment that had turned him into a seven-foot-tall monster. His name was Robert. Each day Robert dressed himself in a fine suit, or a blazer-and-trousers combination. His hands were eighteen inches long. His head was like a fifty-pound Brazil nut with a face. You and I don't know about these diseases until we get them, in which case we also will be put out of sight.

This was part-time work. I was responsible for the facility's newsletter, just a few mimeographed pages issued twice a month. Also it was part of my job to touch people. The patients had nothing to do but stumble or wheel themselves through the wide halls in a herd. Traffic flowed in one direction only, those were the rules. I walked against the tide, according to my instructions, greeting everybody and grasping their hands or squeezing their shoulders, because they needed to be touched, and they didn't get much of that. I always said hello to a gray-haired man in his early forties, vigorous and muscular, but completely senile. He'd take me by the shirtfront and say things like, "There's a price to be paid for

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dreaming." I covered his fingers with my own. Nearby was a woman nearly falling out of her wheelchair and hollering, "Lord? Lord?" Her feet pointed left, her head looked to the right, and her arms twisted around her like ribbons around a maypole. I put my hands in her hair. Meanwhile around us ambled all these people whose eyes made me think of clouds and whose bodies made me think of pillows. And there were others out of whom all the meat appeared to have been sucked by the strange machines they kept in the closets around here—hygienic things. Most of these people were far enough gone that they couldn't bathe themselves. They had to be given their baths by professionals using shiny hoses with sophisticated nozzles.

There was a guy with multiple sclerosis or something like that. A perpetual spasm forced him to perch sideways on his wheelchair and peer down along his nose at his knotted fingers. This condition had descended on him suddenly. He got no visitors. His wife was divorcing him. He was only thirty-three, I believe he said, but it was hard to guess what he told about himself because he really couldn't talk anymore, beyond clamping his lips repeatedly around his protruding tongue while groaning.

No more pretending for him! He was completely and openly a mess. Meanwhile the rest of us go on trying to fool each other.

I always looked in on a man named Frank, amputated above both knees, who greeted me with a magisterial sadness and a nod at his empty pajama pants legs. All day long he watched television from his bed. It wasn't his physical condition that kept him here, but his sadness.

The home lay in a cul-de-sac in east Phoenix, with a view into the desert surrounding the city. This was in the spring of that year, the season when some varieties of cactus produced tiny blossoms out of their thorns. To catch the bus home each day I walked through a vacant lot, and sometimes I'd run right up on one—one small

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orange flower that looked like it had fallen down here from Andromeda, surrounded by a part of the world cast mainly in eleven hundred shades of brown, under a sky whose blueness seemed to get lost in its own distances. Dizzy, enchanted—I'd have felt the same if I'd been walking along and run into an elf out here sitting in a little chair. The desert days were already burning, but nothing could stifle these flowers.

One day, too, when I'd passed through the lot and was walking along behind a row of townhouses on the way to the bus stop, I heard the sound of a woman singing in her shower. I thought of mermaids: the blurry music of falling water, the soft song from the wet chamber. The dusk was down, and the heat came off the hovering buildings. It was rush hour, but the desert sky has a way of absorbing the sounds of traffic and making them seem idle and small. Her voice was the clearest thing coming to my ears.

She sang with the unconsciousness, the obliviousness, of a castaway. She must not have understood that somebody might be able to hear her. It sounded like an Irish hymn.

I thought I might be tall enough to peek inside her window, and it didn't look like anybody would catch me at it.

These townhouses went in for that desert landscaping—gravel and cactus instead of a lawn. I had to walk softly so as not to crunch—not that anybody would have heard my steps. But I didn't want to hear them myself.

Under the window I was camouflaged by a trellis and a vine of morning glories. The traffic went by as always; nobody noticed me. It was one of those small, high bathroom windows. I had to stand on tiptoe and grip the windowsill to keep my chin above it. She'd already stepped from the shower, a woman as soft and young as her voice, but not a girl. Her physique was on the chunky side. She had light hair falling straight and wet almost to the small of her back. She faced away. Mist covered her

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mirror, and also the window, just a bit; otherwise she might have seen my eyes reflected there from behind her. I felt weightless. I had no trouble clinging to the windowsill. I knew that if I let go I wouldn't have the gall to raise my face back up again—by then she might have turned toward the window, might give a yell.

She towelled off quickly, briskly, never touching herself in any indulgent or particularly sensual way. That was disappointing. But it was virginal and exciting, too. I had thoughts of breaking through the glass and raping her. But I would have been ashamed to have her see me. I thought I might be able to do something like that if I were wearing a mask.

My bus went by. Bus twenty-four, it didn't even slow down. Just a glimpse, but I could see how tired everybody inside it must have been, simply by the way they held themselves, pitching to and fro. Many of them I vaguely recognized. Usually we all rode together back and forth, work and home, home and work, but not tonight.

It wasn't all that dark yet. The cars, however, were fewer now; most of the commuters were already in their living rooms watching TV. But not her husband. He drove up while I was there by his bathroom window trying to peek at his wife. I had a feeling, a terrible touch against my neck, and ducked beside a cactus just before his car turned into the drive, at which point his eyes would have swept the wall where I was standing. The car turned into the driveway, out of sight around the building's other side, and I heard the engine die and its last sounds echo out over the evening.

His wife had finished her bath. The door was just shutting behind her. There seemed to be nothing left in that bathroom then but the flatness of that door.

Now that she'd left the bathroom she was lost to me. I wouldn't be able to peek at her because the other windows lay around the building's corner and were visible, full on, from the street.

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I got out of there and waited forty-five minutes for the next bus, the last one on the schedule. By then it was pretty well dark. On the bus I sat in the strange, artificial light with my notebook in my lap, working on my newsletter. "We've got a new crafts hour, too—" I wrote in a bumpy scrawl, "Mondays at 2:00 P.M. Our last project was making animals out of dough. Grace Wright made a dandy Snoopy dog and Clarence Lovell made a gunboat. Others made miniature ponds, turtles, frogs, ladybugs and more." The first woman I actually dated during this era was somebody I met at a "Sober Dance," a social event for recovering drunkards and dope addicts, people like me. She didn't have such problems herself, but her husband had, and he'd run off somewhere long ago. Now she put in time here and there as a volunteer for charity, though she worked a full-time job and was raising a little daughter. We started dating regularly, every Saturday night, and we slept together, too, at her apartment, though I never stayed all the way through to breakfast.

This woman was quite short, well under five feet, closer, in fact, to four and a half feet tall. Her arms weren't proportional to her body, or at least not to her torso, although they matched her legs, which were also exceptionally abbreviated. Medically speaking, she was a dwarf. But that wasn't the first thing you noticed about her. She had large, Mediterranean eyes, full of a certain amount of smoke and mystery and bad luck. She'd learned how to dress so you didn't observe right away that she was a dwarf. When we made love, we were the same size, because her torso was ordinary. It was only her arms and legs that had come out too short. We made love on the floor in her TV room after she got her little daughter down for the night. Between our jobs and her routines with the little girl, we were kept to a kind of schedule. The same shows were always playing when we made love. They were stupid shows, Saturday-night shows. But I was afraid to make love to her without the

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conversations and laughter from that false universe playing in our ears, because I didn't want to get to know her very well and didn't want to be bridging any silences with our eyes.

Usually before that we'd have gone to dinner at one of the Mexican places—the posh ones, with the adobe walls and the velvet paintings that would have been cheap in anybody's home—and we'd have filled each other in on the week's happenings. I told her all about my job at Beverly Home. I was taking a new approach to life. I was trying to fit in at work. I wasn't stealing. I was trying to see each task through to the end. That kind of thing. She, for her part, worked at an airline ticket counter and I suppose she stood on a box to accomplish her transactions. She had an understanding soul. I had no trouble presenting myself to her pretty much as I actually was, except when it came to one thing.

The spring was on, and the days were getting longer. I missed my bus often, waiting to spy on the wife in the townhouse apartment.

How could I do it, how could a person go that low? And I understand your question, to which I reply: Are you kidding? That's nothing. I'd been much lower than that. And I expected to see myself do worse.

Stopping there and watching while she showered, watching her step out naked, dry off and leave the bathroom, and then listening to the sounds her husband made coming home in his car and walking through the front door, all of this became a regular part of my routine. They did the same thing every day. On the weekends I don't know, because I didn't work then. I don't think the buses ran on the same schedule then anyway.

Sometimes I saw her and sometimes I didn't. She never did anything she might have been embarrassed about, and I didn't learn any of her secrets, though I wanted to, especially because she didn't know me. She probably couldn't even have imagined me.

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Usually her husband came home before I left, but he didn't cross my line of sight. One day I went to their house later than usual, went to the front, instead of around to the back. This time I walked past the house just as her husband was getting out of his car. There wasn't much to see, just a man coming home to his supper like anybody else. I'd been curious, and now that I'd had a look at him I could be sure I didn't like him. His head was bald on top. His suit was baggy, wrinkled, comical. He wore a beard, but he shaved his upper lip.

I didn't think he belonged with his wife. He was middle aged or better. She was young. I was young. I imagined running away with her. Cruel giants, mermaids, captivating spells, a hunger for such things seemed to want to play itself out within the desert springtime and its ambushes, its perfumes.

I watched him go inside, then I waited up at my bus stop till it was night. I didn't care about the bus. I was waiting for darkness, when I could stand out front of their house, without being seen, and look right into their living room.

Through the front window I watched them eat supper. She was dressed in a long skirt and wore a white cloth over the crown of her head, something like a skullcap. Before they ate, they dipped their faces and prayed for three or four full minutes.

It had struck me that the husband looked very somber, very old-fashioned, with his dark suit and big shoes, his Lincoln beard and shiny head. Now that I saw the wife in the same kind of getup, I understood: They were Amish, or more likely Mennonites. I knew the Mennonites did missionary work overseas, works of lonely charity in strange worlds where nobody spoke their language. But I wouldn't have expected to find a couple of them all alone in Phoenix, living in an apartment, because these sects normally kept to the rural areas. There was a Bible college nearby; they must have come to take some courses there.

I was excited. I wanted to watch them fucking. I won-

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dered how I could manage to be here when that was happening. If I came back one night late, after dark, I'd be able to stand by the bedroom window without being seen from the street. The idea made me dizzy. I was sick of myself and full of joy. Just watching for a glimpse of her as she stepped from the shower didn't seem enough any more, and I left and went back and waited to get on bus twenty-four. But it was too late, because the last bus had already gone by.

On Thursdays at Beverly Home the oldest patients were rounded up and placed in chairs in the cafeteria before paper cups of milk and given paper plates with cookies on them. They played a game called I Remember—a thing to keep them involved with the details of their lives before they slipped away into senility beyond anybody's reach. Each one would talk about what had happened that morning, what had happened last week, what had happened in the past few minutes.

Once in a while they had a little party, with cupcakes, honoring yet one more year in somebody's life. I had a list of dates, and kept everybody informed: "And on the 10th, Isaac Christopherson turned a whopping 97! Many happy returns! There'll be six birthday people next month. Watch for April's "Beverly Home News" to find out who they are!"

The rooms were set off a hallway that curved until it circled back on itself completely, and you found the room you'd first looked in on. Sometimes it seemed to curve back around in a narrowing spiral, shrinking toward the heart of it all, which was the room you'd begun with—any of the rooms, the room with the man who kept his stumps cuddled like pets under the comforter or the room with the woman who cried, "Lord! Lord!" or the room with the man with blue skin or the room with the man and wife who no longer remembered each others' names.

I didn't spend a lot of time here—ten, twelve hours a

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week, something like that. There were other things to do. I looked for a real job, I went to a therapy group for heroin addicts, I reported regularly to the Local Alcoholic Reception Center, I took walks in the desert springtime. But I felt about the circular hallway of Beverly Home as about the place where, between our lives on this earth, we go back to mingle with other souls waiting to be born.

Thursday nights I usually went to an AA meeting in an Episcopal church's basement. We sat around collapsible tables looking very much like people stuck in a swamp—slapping at invisible things, shifting, squirming, scratching, rubbing the flesh of our arms and our necks.

"I used to walk around in the night," one guy said, a guy named Chris—kind of a friend, we'd been in detox together—"all alone, all screwed-up. Did you ever walk around like that past the houses with their curtains in the windows, and you feel like you're dragging a cart of sins behind you, and did you ever think: behind those windows, behind those curtains, people are leading normal, happy lives?" This was just rhetorical, just part of what he said when it was his turn to say something.

But I got up and left the room and stood around outside the church, smoking lousy low-tar cigarettes, my guts jumping with unintelligible words, until the meeting broke up and I could beg a lift back to my neighborhood.

As for the Mennonite couple, you could almost say that our schedules were coordinated now. I spent a lot of time outside their building, after sundown, in the rapidly cooling dark. Any window suited me by this time. I just wanted to see them at home together.

She always wore a long skirt, flat-heeled walking shoes or sneakers, delicate white socks. She kept her hair pinned up and covered with a white skullcap. Her hair, when it wasn't wet, was quite blond.

I got so I enjoyed seeing them sitting there in their

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living room talking, almost not talking at all, reading the Bible, saying grace, eating their supper in the kitchen alcove, as much as I liked watching her naked in the shower.

If I wanted to wait till it was dark enough, I could stand by the bedroom window without being seen from the street. Several nights I stayed there until they fell asleep. But they never made love. They lay there and never even touched each other, as far as I knew. My guess was that in that kind of religious community they were kept to a schedule or something. How often were they allowed to have each other? Once a month? Or a year? Or for the purpose, only, of getting children? I started to wonder if maybe the morning wasn't their time, if maybe I should come in the morning. But then it would be too light. I was anxious to catch them at it soon, because nowadays they slept with the windows open and the curtains slightly parted. Before much longer it would be too hot for that; they'd turn on the central cooling and shut themselves away.

After a month, or very nearly, the particular night came when I heard her crying out. They'd left the living room just minutes before. It hardly seemed they'd had time to get undressed. They'd put away the things they were reading a little while before that and had been talking quietly, he lying back on the couch and she sitting in the easy chair perpendicular to it. There'd been nothing of the lover about him right then. He hadn't seemed inflamed, but maybe a little nervous, touching the edge of the coffee table with an idle hand and rocking it while they talked.

Now they weren't talking, though. It was almost as if she were singing, as I'd heard her do many times when she thought she was by herself. I hurried around from the living room window to the bedroom.

They'd closed the bedroom window, and the curtains, too. I couldn't hear what they were saying, but I heard the bed springs, I was sure of that, and her lovely cries.

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And soon he was shouting also, like a preacher on the stump. Meanwhile I was lurking there in the dark, trembling, really, from the pit of my stomach out to my fingertips. Two inches of crack at the curtain's edge, that's all I could have, all I could have, it seemed, in the whole world. I could have one corner of the bed, and shadows moving in a thin band of light from the living room. I felt wronged—it wasn't that hot tonight, other people had their windows open, I heard voices, music, messages from their televisions, and their cars going by and their sprinklers hissing. But of the Mennonites, almost nothing. I felt abandoned, cast out of the fold. I was ready to break the glass with a rock.

But already their cries were over. I tried the window's other end, where the curtains were drawn more snugly, and though the view was narrower, the angle was better. From this side I could see shadows moving in the light from the living room. In fact they'd never made it to the bed. They were standing upright. Not passionately twining. More likely they were fighting. The bedroom lamp came on. Then a hand drew the curtain aside. Just like that I was staring into her face.

I thought to run, but it was such a nauseating jolt that suddenly I didn't know how to move. But after all it didn't matter. My face wasn't two feet from hers, but it was dark out and she could only have been looking at her own reflection, not at me. She was alone in the bedroom. She still had all her clothes on. I had the same flutter in my heart that I got when I happened to stroll past a car parked off by itself somewhere, with a guitar or a suede jacket on the front seat, and I'd think: but anybody could steal this.

I stood on the dark side of her and actually couldn't see very well, but I got the impression she was upset. I thought I heard her weeping. I could have touched a teardrop, I stood that close. I was pretty sure that, shadowed as I was, she wouldn't notice me now, unless perhaps I made a movement, so I stayed very still while

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absently she put her hand to her head and removed the little bonnet, the skullcap. I peered at her dark face until I was sure she was grieving—chewing her lower lip, staring and letting the tears fall across her cheeks.

In just a minute or so, her husband came back. He took several steps into the room and paused like somebody, a boxer or a football player maybe, trying to walk with an injury. They'd been arguing, and he was sorry, it was plain in the way he stood there with his jaw stuck on a word and kind of holding his apology in his hands. But his wife wouldn't turn around.

He put an end to the argument by getting down before her and washing her feet.

First he left the room once more, and after a while he returned with a basin, a yellow plastic thing for washing the dishes, carrying it in a careful way that made it obvious there was water sloshing inside it. He had a kitchen towel draped over one shoulder. He put the basin on the floor and went down on one knee, head bowed, as if he were proposing to her. She didn't move for a while, not perhaps for a full minute, which seemed like a very long time to me outside in the dark with a great loneliness and the terror of a whole life not yet lived, and the TVs and garden sprinklers making the noises of a thousand lives never to be lived, and the cars going by with the sound of passage, movement, untouchable, uncatchable. Then she turned toward him, slipped her tennis shoes from her feet, reached backward to each lifted ankle one after the other, and peeled the small white socks off. She dipped the toe of her right foot into the water, then the whole foot, lowering it down out of sight into the yellow basin. He took the cloth from his shoulder, never once looking up at her, and started the washing.

By this time I wasn't dating the Mediterranean beauty any more; I was seeing another woman, who was of normal size, but happened to be crippled.

As a small child she'd had encephalitis, sleeping sick-

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ness. It had cut her down the middle, like a stroke. Her left arm was almost useless. She could walk, but she dragged her left leg, swinging it around from behind her with every step. When she was excited, which was especially the case when she made love, the paralyzed arm would start to quiver and then rise up, float upward, in a miraculous salute. She'd begin to swear like a sailor, cursing out of the side of her mouth, the side that wasn't thick with paralysis.

I stayed at her studio apartment once or twice a week, all the way through to morning. I almost always woke up before she did. Usually I worked on the newsletter for Beverly Home, while outside, in the desert clarity, people splashed in the apartment complex's tiny swimming pool. I sat at her dining table with pen and paper and consulted my notes, writing, "Special announcement! On Saturday, April 25th, at 6:30 P.M., a group from the Southern Baptist Church in Tollson will be putting on a Bible pageant for Beverly Home residents. It should be inspiring—don't miss it!"

She'd lie in bed awhile, trying to stay asleep, clinging to that other world. But soon she'd get up, galumphing toward the bathroom with the sheet half wrapped around her and trailing her wildly orbiting leg. For the first few minutes after she got up in the morning her paralysis was quite a bit worse. It was unwholesome, and very erotic.

Once she was up we'd drink coffee, instant coffee with low-fat milk, and she'd tell me about all the boyfriends she'd had. She'd had more boyfriends than anybody I'd ever heard of. Most of them had been given short lives.

I liked the time we spent in her kitchen those mornings. She liked it, too. Usually we were naked. Her eyes shed a certain brightness while she talked. And then we made love.

Her sofa bed was two steps from the kitchen. We'd take those steps and lie down. Ghosts and sunshine hovered around us. Memories, loved ones, everyone was watching. She'd had one boyfriend who was killed by a

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train—stalled on the tracks and thinking he could get his motor firing before the engine caught him, but he was wrong. Another fell through a thousand evergreen boughs in the North Arizona mountains, a tree surgeon or someone along those lines, and crushed his head. Two died in the Marines, one in Vietnam and the other, a younger boy, in an unexplained one-car accident just after basic training. Two black men: One died of too many drugs and another was shanked in prison—that means stabbed with a weapon from the woodworking shop. Most of these people, by the time they were dead, had long since left her to travel down their lonely paths. People just like us, but unluckier. I was full of a sweet pity for them as we lay in the sunny little room, sad that they would never live again, drunk with sadness, I couldn't get enough of it.

During my regular hours at Beverly Home, the full-time employees had their shift change, and a lot of them congregated, coming and going, in the kitchen, where the time clock was. I often went in there and flirted with some of the beautiful nurses. I was just learning to live sober and in fact I was often confused, especially because some Antabuse I was taking was having a very uncharacteristic effect on me. Sometimes I heard voices muttering in my head, and a lot of the time the world seemed to smolder around its edges. But I was in a little better physical shape every day, I was getting my looks back, and my spirits were rising, and this was all in all a happy time for me.

All these weirdos, and me getting a little better every day right in the midst of them. I had never known, never even imagined for a heartbeat, that there might be a place for people like us.

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Two Poems by Amy Clampitt

Seed

The way it came spinning onto the lawn—
the elm trees' chaffy currency, each piece
with a spot of seed at the center; the katydid-
colored, breeze-littering spindles let fall
by the maples; the squirm of catkins
fattening on the schoolyard poplars;
the way it annually left its smudge
like a bloodletting under the mulberry
in the first weeks of summer:

spring after spring, the same spangling,
smirching rain of it, making way
for yet other excesses—dewed,
swelling, softening to vegetable rot;
the fanged, maculate, pollen-triggering
tiger lily; the bearded rasp and
ripple of the barley; in field after
field, tasseled, seminal, knife-edged,
the green blades' rustle.

Nobody to hear the screams, if there
were any: . . . *found her* (a quasi-
prurient horror as the word went round) *down
in the cornfield. Strangled. And that ain't
all he* . . . Folks those days had trouble
saying it out loud. Some drifter. Never
caught. Whoever first set up the lingam
and called it Shiva—whatever minion of
some gross, overweening stud . . .

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But wait. Remember, there was also Krishna,
flute-player, playboy, holding hands with
all the girls: the warm days glistening
with the feckless pollen of him, the nights
alive with yearning, the music of him,
the moist promises. And after? Doing
the reluctant decent thing. In haste,
stood up with by strangers. The neighbors
counting off the months.

Or that other, worse history, unhinted at
so long, appallingly unburdened one night
over a sepia portrait: *The one who died,*
the prettiest of them: what really happened—
even in those days, in that family:
you knew? Or the living issue, the tie
still unacknowledged: *God was cruel*—thus
Mrs. Transome to Denner, servant and
confidant—*when he made us women.*

And Denner: *I shouldn't like to be a man—*
to cough so loud, and stand straddling about . . .
No matter. The moist, channeling silk awaits
the hanging tassel: *And in multiplying I*
will multiply thy seed as the stars of heaven,
and as the sand which is upon the sea shore. Or
as the storm of stuff the cottonwood squanders
in windrows on the sidewalk—even though
for a man to spend it thus

is, it is written, an abomination: as it is for
a woman to abort. See how the last mystery
rises to a travesty. Golf-cart sitcom.
The lingam huge, no joke. Steel-nippled
gorgon madonna of the primal scene.

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I will make a song full of weapons, with
menacing points, and behind the weapons,
countless dissatisfied faces: thus
turbulent, fleshy, sensual,

eating and drinking and breeding Walt Whitman
(whom Emily Dickinson did not read, having
heard he was a great scoundrel),
celebrating the procreative urge, being himself
without issue: *of wombs and of the father-stuff,*
of sexes and lusts, voices veiled (he wrote),
and I remove the veil—which Edith Wharton
on the dreadful eve (she was twenty-three)
begged to have lifted

("You've looked at statues in museums, haven't you?"
her mother said, and coldly closed the subject):
who, childless, long schooled in discretion,
remembered sitting on the terrace at The Mount
late into the evening, hearing Henry James intone
the *Leaves of Grass,* extolling the father-stuff
above the lake, while fireflies signaled
the unending seedfall, the glinting
feculence of summer.

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Matrix

Villa Serbelloni, Lake Como
for Karen Chase

Perched for the nonce among such verticals,
such strata (And did the Principessa
have any friends down there? —O no,

she was *nobilità*), where history
is one long redoubt, where underlings
daily feed into the mangle, fold

on fold, the vellum-and-magnolia-petal
linens we sleep between—our dreams
burrow toward bedrock, down to the matrix

as though the flinging open of so many
windows, such excess of light and air,
of attitude, the ease of bearing

up from the crypt, encysted, lapidary,
such indignities—the plucked eyeball
of Saint Lucy, Saint Roch's leprous thigh,

Sebastian, his lovely nakedness a grove,
a garden of undoing; the gouging
and the piercing, the vials held

by winged minions frantic lest a drop,
a berry from the tree of earthly horror
go unaccounted for; the ooze of blood,

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O hideous, O precious—could not
but be requited by some warden of
the long-repressed, exhuming this

wrapped corpse: holy and dreadful,
the undisposed-of body of the mother.
Whose? The nightmare is not being sure.

Down by the lake we note, strolling a dense
memorial clutter, the dead baby, starkly
photographed; wreathed and embedded,

la moglie in mourning overhung
by the carved smirk of an upstart
lord and master; faceless in their nook

outside the walls, the name and birthplace
of the Englishman who drowned, whose fate
now furnishes the stony living room

we who still live inhabit: outcrop and under-
croft, retaining wall where lizards hide,
the red valerian hangs, and busy daisies

here called *margheritas* burgeon in
a sun the cool spleenwort shrinks from;
precipice in whose still deeper shade

the violets of spring live on, as though
they'd undermine the summer; stone,
nurturer of Europe, the bereaved

exile's lost mother—otherwise
why this going back, these hankerings
after a relinquished privilege,

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why her indentured hold on what we are
or could have been, why this unearned
nostalgia for the culture of the vine,

the pruning of the olive? Observing
how a laborer with a scythe, his
immemorial bending curve repeated

all afternoon, turned what had been a meadow
stippled first with buttercups, then the
beginning red of poppies, into a hayfield,

I thought (don't laugh) of Virgil
brooding on unrest in the metropolis,
knowing the countryside to be no idyl—

one's neighbors sly and fickle, played on
by superstitious rant. Some things
hardly change. There came an evening

toward the end of May, the cherries
reddening on the slope, when a small
procession, mainly of women, moved

up through the hayfield to a chapel
built in honor of My, Our, Their
Lady of the Monserrato, as every year

it had for precisely, in this instance,
the last four hundred. Some of us
came down (ah, feudal perquisites)

from dinner to look on. The Lady,
it appears, was Spanish to begin with,
named for a place denoting merely

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a serrated peak. And so, above
her altar the Holy Child is shown
with, in his little hand, a little saw.

What *is* all this? Vigil candles
were fluttering; rosary-fingerers,
swaying as they sang, were singing

over and over, "Ave Marie, Madre di
Dio, tu sei la madre della Chiesa"—and
if, swaying with them, the pagan thrill

I felt had in it something wistful,
the thing I hankered after was no
rite but a foundation, the bedrock

that survives, the banded strata,
hurled reliquary of the drowned,
remnant of uncountable transformings:

precipice, gray limestone I've looked up
into the face of until the looking up
amounted to an attitude of worship:

stone that rings underfoot, whose surfaces
grow populous within doors as a tuned
instrument, eloquent of what lived once,

is now the stuff of cliffs, of crypts,
of hideouts. This morning, following
a track down to the lake, I came upon

a hollow in the cliff wall where,
drip-eroded, rosary-hung, dead flowers
littering the cave floor, there she was:

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prayed to and put upon, another idol
of the universal mother. What *is*
all this? The infant in us still

won't let her go—lugubrious poppet,
nurturer, devourer. Down below,
well-being's amniotic nightmare

lay rocking to its own small music,
cradling the precipice—the clear,
uneasy, treacherous green water.

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Two Poems by Stephen Dobyns

Favorite Iraqi Soldier

Into his kit when sent to the front he had tucked
his black three-piece suit and through night
after night of the frightful bombing, which
not only wiped out but pragmatically entombed

his luckless comrades in a marvel of technological
decadence, he had kept the suit protected
so that at the surrender he had stripped naked
and slipped it on. This is when the photographer

caught him, that among the thousands of defeated
there walked one Iraqi in a three-piece suit
who tried to express by his general indifference
that he had stumbled into all this carnage simply

by accident and was now intent on strolling away.
I am a modest banker tossed on the wrong bus.
I am a humble stockbroker who took a wrong turn.
And he passed through the American lines

and began hitchhiking south. Did he elect
to relocate in Kuwait? Fat chance! Did he
want the lovable Saudis as new neighbors?
Quite unlikely! What about the opportunities

offered by the Libyans, Tunisians, Egyptians?
Truly hilarious! Was there any place in Africa
where he hoped to lay his head? Decidedly
not! What about Europe where he could start

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as a servant or chop vegetables in the back
of a restaurant but work his way up? Completely
crazy! Or North America where he could dig
a ditch but with the right breaks might buy

a used car? Too ludicrous! What about South
America where he could pick fruit or Asia where
he could toil in a sweat shop? You must be nuts!
In his black suit he is already dressed for the part

and hopes to hitchhike to one of those Antarctic
islands and stroll around with the penguins.
Good evening Mr. White, good evening Mrs. Black,
your children swim quite nicely, they look

so hardy and fit. No one to give him orders
but the weather. No one to terrify him
but the occasional shark. No one to be mean to
but the little fish, who were put into this ocean

to serve him and whom he praises with each bite.
Thank you, gray brother, for the honor you have
bestowed
on my belly. May you have the opportunity
to devour me when my days on earth are done.

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Fatal Kisses

Brutal lips, slasher lips—as a stunned toddler
pecked by fifteen older female cousins carries the red
tokens of such oral stimulation so the elderly
bear the imprint of their endurance. Let's say

you hop off the porch and stomp on a nail. Ouch!
Well, that nail carves its caress, a thin crease
across the forehead. The summer day that Joey Dugan
wrecked your bike has left its mark. Your first
orgasm,

those times you've guffawed and slapped your knee,
the time your goldfinch died—each occasion imparts
a kiss, sometimes a single crease, sometimes a crease
upon a crease, sometimes a crease on top of that.

Consider the lateral slot which frustration chops
between the eyebrows. How many nasty moments
have
gouged you there? Until it seems cavernous enough
for a coin, until death deposits its token and

trots you away. Cheeks, forehead, chin, baggy eyes,
even each earlobe displays a single traverse cut
until checking the mirror is like perusing the book
of one's emotional life—all the laughter, all the tears.

That's not you, that's your diary—like a tablecloth
after a sumptuous meal, like bed sheets after a night
of making love—that's not you, that's scratch paper.
The real you, or so you claim, still throbs far beneath

all that jam, all that lipstick, all those tread marks.
Nowadays of course they can lift it off. Pay a fortune
to a plastic surgeon and snip snip he can pluck it
from your noggin just like you once stripped off

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your football helmet. He'll set it on the table
where it will jiggle like a tub full of Jello.
What a life you've had! A face like a photo album,
a road map of good times. Its zigzagged lines
resemble

evidence of erosion seen from the sky, the parched
red earth of some western town, a few cacti, a few
cattle on their last legs, and at this little joke,
your skull—all that's left of course—grins and grins.

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Two Poems by Toi Derricotte

Bird

The secret is
not to be afraid, to
pour the salt, letting your wrist
be free—there is almost
never too much; it sits on top of the skin like a
little crystal casket. Under, the bird might
imagine another life, one in which it is grateful
for pleasing, can smell
itself cooking—the taste
of carrots, onions, potatoes stewed
in its own juice—and forget
the dreams of blood
coursing out of its throat like a river.

Peripheral

Maybe it's a bat's wings
at the corner of your eye, right
where the eyeball swivels
into its pocket. But when
the brown of your eye turns
where you thought the white saw,
there's only air & gold light,
reality—as your mother defined it—
(milk/no milk). Not for years
did you learn the word *longing,*
and only then did you see the bat—
just the fringe of its wings
beating, its back in a heavy
black cloak.

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Two Poems by J.D. McClatchy

Chott

Through the tentflap, across the air mattress, up over
my shoulderblade,
The blindfold of sunlight slips into place. On your
borrowed Walkman

The muezzin's morning call to prayer clears its throat
of unbelief.
Already out there pillars of sand are forming to hold
up the sky

For minutes at a time before they buckle and collapse
with exhaustion.
One more day on the salt flats. Air tight as a
water-skin. Black flies

On your eyelid. Sun. Two suns, the counterfeit sun
curling like a petal,
Separating from the true, wrenched from it to simmer
on its reflection,

A handsbreadth between them now, the true one
hauled up dripping.
Whose idea was a week on a dead sea anyway? A
week away from the port,

Away from the café's chewed pits and prawnshuck,
the featheredged kif.
In their teaching rooms, the holy men were promising
He has forced

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The night and the day into your service, set forgiving mountains down
Lest the earth should move away with you. Caked mud and brine crust,

Like two drops of blood on a pillow, both dried to the same charred brick.
To brush away those flies risks touching you. The Jeep hood flutters.

Out beyond your head, slumped now over your breasts, the horizon's
Hit on the day's first mirage—lolling palms, a milky water hole,

Two Frenchmen in rockers. Is that a woman, her arm up to shade her eyes?
Or protect herself? A bronze basin over—*(Wake up, damn you. Wake. Up.)*

A mirage, the goatherd said, is always something you once had or wanted.
So by that logic, the past . . . no matter. It was only another promise.

Remember those first days in bed? The braided candlelight, the net of stars,
The ghost streams running underneath the body, under the loathing.

The years, the miles out and back are run through us as we sit here.
This whole thing, it's inside a bottle, that empty fifth Hussein kept

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His miniature desert in for the tourists, the dwarfed
ruins he'd tweezered
Onto a dirty inch of nowhere, the how many layers of
wornaway rock,

The grains of lives dry as the world's bone. Look at
the sun in there,
That glistening drop of poison at the tip of the
scorpion's tail.

Taking Leave

Whatever dreams of escape may cast their spell,
From a tiny room inside the Buddha's topknot
Your double rings a faint instinctive bell:
taste touch sight sound smell

Now that sex is "safe" and you're still "well,"
You think that thinking is the cause of "sin"?
The fatal warning's imprinted on each cell:
taste touch sight sound smell

You run your hand along his thigh and tell
Him bourgeois culture's still a liberal plot.
The oppressor's pride at once begins to swell:
taste touch sight sound smell

To avoid desire, the Chinese sages dwell
In Nothing they've cut doors and windows in.
For all their bark, the straw dogs bite as well:
taste touch sight sound smell

The body of knowledge, stuck in a book-lined hell,
Twists on a wick of grief. In flames not hot
But burning hard it takes from flesh its farewell:
taste touch sight sound smell

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Two Poems by Rachel Hadas

Into the Wind

I walk downhill and lean into the wind.
It is and isn't the first time. Hour, weather,
errand all proclaim Now and Again.
Late comes the sense that all will go on without us,

late the undoing. When it's all undone,
still winter sunset bleeds across the sky
coldly unfurling alpha and omega,
ending and origin. The wall of winter

still stands behind the mists
of our preoccupation,
still lingers in our speech.
Patterns of thought run deep.

Late comes the sense we're carried by a stream
that has worn grooves in the ground already.
Was it pure illusion, sensing each
impulse and gesture as spontaneous, new?

And all the while we were ourselves ideas,
not new ones, either, of if not a mind
call it a system. An intelligence?
Buffeted by gales blowing up from the river

(when I was ten years old they blew me back
up this same hill, yet then I felt autonomous),
belatedly I take it in as law
that it is time to lean into the wind,

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assume personae without irony.
Today—not today only—loyal daughter,
term I construe now in a wintry way.
No sooner have I grasped this than I come

face to face with yet another rune
blown in my flinching face (or are they one?):
laws we thought we had enacted turn,
chisel in hand, and carve us like a stone.

The Bees of the Invisible

In memory of Dan Conner

A golden haze—departed souls—
hovers above the summer lawn,
performs its barely legible
dances inside a mote of sun.

Hovering above the summer lawn
wordless graffiti of unease
dance inside a mote of sun
and disappear into the trees.

Wordless graffiti of unease
when people die where do they go?
disappear into the trees.
I'm not sure I remember you.

When people die where do they go?
Summer stormclouds drift away.
I'm not sure I remember you.
You've left, but here's another day.

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Summer stormclouds drift away.
The sky is blank but beautiful.
You've left, yet here's another day,
a cup of emptiness to fill.

The sky is blank but beautiful.
Nothing will ever be the same—
a cup of emptiness to fill,
symbols shaped into a name.

Nothing will ever be the same.
I cannot mourn without a sense
of symbols shaped into a name,
alphabet of intelligence.

I cannot mourn without a sense
of something that transcends the whole
alphabet of intelligence,
the bees of the invisible.

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James Lasdun

The Calling of the Apostle Matthew

Not the abrupt way, frozen
In the one glance of a painter's frame,
Christ in the doorway pointing, Matthew's face
Bright with perplexity, the glaze
Of a lifetime at the counting house
Cracked in the split-second's bolt of being chosen,

But over the years, slowly,
Hinted at, an invisible curve;
Persistent bias always favoring
Backwardly the relinquished thing
Over the kept, the gold signet ring
Dropped in a beggar's bowl, the eye not fully

Comprehending the hand, not yet;
Heirloom damask thrust in a passing
Stranger's hand, a ceremonial saddle
(Looped coins, crushed clouds of inlaid pearl)
Given on an irresistible
Impulse to a servant. Where it sat,

A saddle-shaped emptiness
Briefly, obscurely brimming . . . Flagons,
Cellars of wine, then as impulse steadied
Into habit, habit to need,
Need to compulsion, the whole vineyard,
The land itself, groves, herds, the ancestral house,

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Given away, each object's
Hollowed-out void successively
More vivid in him than the thing itself,
As if renouncing merely gave
Density to having; as if
He'd glimpsed in nothingness a derelict's

Secret of unabated,
Inverse possession . . . And only then,
Almost superfluous, does the figure
Step softly to the shelter door
Casual, foreknown, almost familiar,
Calmly received, like someone long awaited.

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Sandra McPherson

Two Men Trading Dance Movements at Tabby's Blues Box and Heritage Hall, Baton Rouge

Whatever is expressive
about clumsiness (bad knees),
disproportion (potbelly,
putto hands), untaught
self-portraiture,
wall-hugging, cold
feet, or stillness—
chilled into models—
painters must jar
to life,
we may like this
more, seeing
how these men start from an uncandescent
corner by the entry door
(not at the back
by the restrooms'
mussed, rampageous
tulip colors)
and match up: two men,
simply, by image,
but impulse-different, nerve-distinct.

And so, beginning from this vertex,
the two
open like radiolarians—
one with blazing glass bones
raving from its nucleus,
the other living out

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of an invisible core
with a burst
of tines (like burrs,
chinquapin nuts, globefish)
at the globe-surface (wands,
extrusions, rep of
waffles and honeycombs, cages
permuting to regalia,
those microscopic bombastic
laces, cacti, and grilles,
the bizarre—a hairnet over antlers,
javelins
beside featherstitching), and
alternate astonishing
each other with outward-firing
or inward-brawling flurries
of their two repertoires, one
a medusa disentangling,
the other formal as a Caspian tern.

One morning, later, after
a downpour, I track raindrops
where hairs on a flume-creased tree-lupine leaf
roll them into spheres,
and under a hand-lens see dancers,
magnifying partners,
bump the diving-bell edge,
a tense bay window,
and propel there, a pair
in a room not yet evaporated.
These two
are in a tournament
and I recall
how one man, pearl-three-pieced
and cubist, dances his
points, lines, angles,
surfaces, and solids,
then the other,

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in work blues, purling,
water-snaky, suddenly
up through the waist sends a shudder
into shoulders, forearms, hands over head
to traverse the room
in a turbidity whipping up something
like the gasp
at Jules Lion's first New Orleans
daguerreotypes that there is a whole
re-erected city there
yet every detail—an insect
on a stone of a cathedral—
can be discerned, lucid in itself.

What esteem
they are paying each other,
stretching a flat hand out
to the other's palm, back
and forth all evening until the elegant
man decides the serpentine
has won, concedes but is so pleased
he holds the other's grip a moment.
These are not dances
the world knows; they are inside
explosions, privity,
idiosyncrasy with
molecularly fine technique.

When paint peels
off Tabby's walls, when the photographs
of road-brumous singers
curl around their tacks,
that is how they move,
this is contractual art,
fleshed fireworks, a making
for the other
of a signal pointing
away from isolation,

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a countersign that will only work if
aurified by *horror vacui*
and tavern lamp
and encountered
round a corner,
a prospect contracting them to be—
with acutest scope—
infinitesimally
visible together,
down to
the winner's work-keys
still ringed
to his belt-loop.

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For the writer of a language which is not (or no more) an universally understood one, the translator is a natural and necessary ally, and almost a vital part of himself as a communicating organism. I never forget that without the translator's work what I'm writing couldn't circulate outside the borders of my own country. I've always tried to give my help to the work of my translators into the languages I know, revising their translations, discussing with them. And this is always an important experience for me, because it gives me a chance to re-read what I've written from the different point of view of another language. Translators are the only sure readers of a text - of everithing inside the text - and the translation's readers read through their reading.

In my life I've worked for a Turin publishing firm - and I still do - where the principal job is the revision of translations; so I always carry inside me the passion for the unreacheable perfection in translating - and also the suffering for the perpetual dissatisfaction and frustration which are the lot of this job.

So everything that is done in order to improve the difficult art of translating interests me -

Italo Calvino

A manuscript page from an essay on translation written in English by Italo Calvino.

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Irving Penn. Courtesy *Vanity Fair*. © Conde Nast Publications, Inc.

Italo Calvino

The Art of Fiction CXXX

Upon hearing of Italo Calvino's death in September 1985, John Updike commented, "Calvino was a genial as well as brilliant writer. He took fiction into new places where it had never been before, and back into the fabulous and ancient sources of narrative." At that time Calvino was the preeminent Italian writer, the influence of his fantastic novels and stories reaching far beyond the Mediterranean.

Two years before, The Paris Review *had commissioned a*

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Writers-at-Work interview with Calvino, to be conducted by William Weaver, his longtime English translator. It was never completed, though Weaver later rewrote his introduction as a remembrance. Still later, The Paris Review *purchased transcripts of a videotaped interview with Calvino (produced and directed by Damien Pettigrew and Gaspard Di Caro) and a memoir by Pietro Citati, the Italian critic. What follows—these three selections and a transcript of Calvino's thoughts before being interviewed—is a collage, an oblique portrait.*

—R.G.

Italo Calvino was born on October 15, 1923 in Santiago de Las Vegas, a suburb of Havana. His father Mario was an agronomist who had spent a number of years in tropical countries, mostly in Latin America. Calvino's mother Eva, a native of Sardinia, was also a scientist, a botanist. Shortly after their son's birth, the Calvinos returned to Italy and settled in Liguria, Professor Calvino's native region. As Calvino grew up, he divided his time between the seaside town of San Remo, where his father directed an experimental floriculture station, and the family's country house in the hills, where the senior Calvino pioneered the growing of grapefruit and avocados.

The future writer studied in San Remo, then enrolled in the Agriculture Department of the University of Turin, lasting there only until the first examinations. When the Germans occupied Liguria and the rest of northern Italy during World War II, Calvino and his sixteen-year-old brother evaded the Fascist draft and joined the partisans.

Afterward, Calvino began writing, chiefly about his wartime experiences. He published his first stories and at the same time resumed his university studies, transferring from agriculture to literature. During this time he wrote his first novel, *The Path to the Nest of Spiders* (*Il*

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sentiero dei nidi di ragno, 1947), which he submitted to a contest sponsored by the Mondadori publishing firm. The novel did not place in the competition, but the writer Cesare Pavese passed it on to the Turin publisher Giulio Einaudi, who accepted it, establishing a relationship with Calvino that would continue throughout most of his life. When *The Path to the Nest of Spiders* appeared in 1947, the year that Calvino took his university degree, he had already started working for Einaudi.

In the postwar period, the Italian literary world was deeply committed to politics, and Turin, an industrial capital, was a focal point. Calvino joined the Italian Communist party, and reported on the Fiat company for the party's daily newspaper.

After the publication of his first novel, Calvino made several stabs at writing a second, but it was not until 1952, five years later, that he published a novella, *The Cloven Viscount (Il visconte dimezzato).* Sponsored by Elio Vittorini and published in a series of books by new writers called Tokens *(I gettoni)* it was immediately praised by reviewers, though its departure from the more realistic style of his first novel resulted in criticism from the Party, from which he resigned in 1956, when Hungary was invaded by the Soviet Union.

In 1956 Calvino published a seminal collection of Italian folktales. The following year he brought out *The Baron in the Trees (Il barone rampante),* and in 1959 *The Nonexistent Knight (Il cavaliere inesistente).* These two stories, with *The Cloven Viscount,* have been collected in the volume *Our Ancestors (I nostri antenati).* In 1965 he published *Cosmicomics (Le cosmicomiche),* and in 1979 his novel (or anti-novel) *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler (Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore)* appeared. The last works published during his lifetime were *Mr. Palomar* (1983), a novel, and *Difficult Loves* (1984), a collection of stories.

Calvino died on September 19, 1985, in a hospital in Siena, thirteen days after suffering a stroke.

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I first met Italo Calvino in a bookshop in Rome, sometime in the spring of 1965—my memory-picture has us both wearing light suits. I had been living in Rome for well over a decade. Calvino had returned to the city only a short time before, after a long period in Paris. He asked me abruptly—he was never a man for idle circumlocution—if I would like to translate his latest book, *Le cosmicomiche.* Though I hadn't read it, I immediately said yes. I picked up a copy before leaving the store and we arranged to get together a few days later.

He was living with his family in a small, recently modernized apartment in the mediaeval quarter of the city, near the Tiber. Like Calvino houses that I was to know later, the apartment gave the impression of being sparsely furnished; I remember the stark white walls, the flooding sunlight. We talked about the book, which I had read in the meanwhile. I learned that he had already tried out—and flunked—one English translator, and I wanted to know the reason for my colleague's dismissal. Indiscreetly, Calvino showed me the correspondence. One of the stories in the volume was called "Without Colors" *("Senza colori").* In an excess of misguided originality, the translator had entitled the piece "In Black and White." Calvino's letter of dismissal pointed out that black and white are colors. I signed on.

My first translation of Calvino had a difficult history. The American editor who commissioned it changed jobs just as I was finishing, and—on my unfortunate advice—Calvino followed him to his new firm. But then the editor committed suicide, the new house turned down *Cosmicomics,* the old house wouldn't have us back, and the book was adrift. It was rejected by other publishers, until Helen Wolff at Harcourt Brace Jovanovich accepted it, beginning Calvino's long association with that publishing house. The book received glowing reviews (and one fierce pan from, predictably, the first translator) and won the National Book Award for translation.

From 1966 until his death there was hardly a time

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when I wasn't translating (or supposed to be translating) something by him. On occasion he would call up and ask me to translate a few pages of text at top speed, a statement he had to make for a Canadian television program, or a little introduction to a book on conduits. He loved strange assignments: The wondrous *Castle of Crossed Destinies* (*Il castello dei destini incrociati,* 1969) was born as a commentary on a Renaissance deck of tarot cards.

With Calvino, every word had to be weighed. I would hesitate for whole minutes over the simplest word, *bello* (beautiful) or *cattivo* (bad). Every word had to be tried out. When I was translating *Invisible Cities,* my weekend guests in the country always were made to listen to a city or two, read aloud.

Writers do not necessarily cherish their translators, and I occasionally had the feeling that Calvino would have preferred to translate his books himself. In later years he liked to see the galleys of the translation; he would make changes—in his English. The changes were not necessarily corrections of the translation; more often they were revisions, alterations of his own text. Calvino's English was more theoretical than idiomatic. He also had a way of falling in love with foreign words. With the *Mr. Palomar* translation he developed a crush on the word *feedback.* He kept inserting it in the text, and I kept tactfully removing it. I couldn't make it clear to him that, like *charisma* and *input* and *bottom line, feedback,* however beautiful it may sound to the Italian ear, was not appropriate in an English-language literary work.

One August afternoon in 1982, I drove to Calvino's summer house—a modern, roomy villa in a secluded residential complex at Roccamare on the Tuscan sea coast north of Grosseto. After exchanging greetings, we settled down in big comfortable chairs on the broad, shaded terrace. The sea was not visible, but you could sense it through the pungent, pine-scented air.

Calvino, most of the time, was not a talkative man,

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never particularly sociable. He tended to see the same old friends, some of them associates from Einaudi. Though we had known each other for twenty years, went to each other's houses, worked together, we were never confidants. Indeed, until the early 1980s we addressed each other with the formal *lei;* I called him Signor Calvino and he called me Weaver, unaware how I hated being addressed by my surname, a reminder of my dread prep-school days. Even after we were on first-name terms, when he telephoned me I could sense a pause before his "Bill?" He was dying to call me Weaver as in the past.

I don't want to give the impression that he couldn't be friendly. Along with his silences, I remember his laughter, often sparked by some event in our work together. And I remember a present he gave me, an elegant little publication about a recently restored painting by Lorenzo Lotto (1480–1556), a St. Jerome. Inside, Calvino wrote, "For Bill, the translator as saint."

Still, thinking back on it, I always felt somewhat the intruder.

—William Weaver

Thoughts Before an Interview

Every morning I tell myself: today has to be productive, and then something happens that prevents me from writing. Today . . . what is there that I have to do today? Oh yes, they are supposed to come interview me. I am afraid my novel will not move one single step forward. Something always happens. Each morning I already know I will be able to waste the whole day. There is always something to do: go to the bank, the post office, pay some bills . . . always some bureaucratic tangle I have to deal with. While I am out I also do errands such as the daily shopping: buying bread, meat or fruit. First thing,

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I buy newspapers . . . once one has bought them one starts reading as soon as one is back home, or at least, looking at the headlines to persuade oneself that there is nothing worth reading. Every day I tell myself that reading newspapers is a waste of time, but then . . . I cannot do without them. They are like a drug. In short, only in the afternoon do I sit at my desk, which is always submerged in letters that have been awaiting answers for I do not even know how long, and that is another obstacle to be overcome.

Eventually I get down to writing and then the real problems begin. If I start something from scratch, that is the most difficult moment, but even if it is something I started the day before, I always reach an impasse where a new obstacle needs to be overcome. And it is only in the late afternoon that I finally begin to write sentences, correct them, cover them with erasures, fill them with incidental clauses and rewrite. At that very moment the telephone or doorbell usually rings and a friend, translator or interviewer arrives. Speaking of which . . . this afternoon . . . the interviewers . . . I do not know if I will have the time to prepare. I could try to improvise but I believe an interview needs to be prepared ahead of time to sound spontaneous. Rarely does an interviewer ask questions you did not expect. I have given a lot of interviews and I have concluded that the questions always look alike. I could always give the same answers. But I believe I have to change my answers because with each interview something has changed either inside myself or in the world. An answer that was right the first time may not be right again the second. This could be the basis of a book. I am given a list of questions, always the same; every chapter would contain the answers I would give at different times. The changes would contain the answers I would give at different times. The changes would then become the itinerary, the story that the protagonist lives. Perhaps in this way I could discover some truths about myself.

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But I must go home—the time approaches for the interviewers to arrive.

God help me!

—Italo Calvino

INTERVIEWER

What place, if any at all, does delirium have in your working life?

ITALO CALVINO

Delirium? . . . Let's assume I answer, "I am always rational. Whatever I say or write, everything is subject to reason, clarity and logic." What would you think of me? You'd think I'm completely blind when it comes to myself, a sort of paranoiac. If on the other hand I were to answer, "Oh, yes, I am really delirious; I always write as if I were in a trance, I don't know how I write such crazy things," you'd think me a fake, playing a not too credible character. Maybe the question we should start from is: What of myself do I put into what I write? My answer: I put my reason, my will, my taste, the culture I belong to, but at the same time I cannot *control,* shall we say, my neurosis, or what we could call delirium.

INTERVIEWER

What is the nature of your dreams? Are you more interested in Jung than you are in Freud?

CALVINO

Once after reading Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams,* I went to bed. I dreamt. The following morning I could

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remember perfectly my dream, so I was able to apply Freud's method to my dream and explain it to the very last detail. At that moment I believed that a new era for me was about to begin; from that moment on my dreams would no longer keep any secrets from me. It didn't happen. That was the only time Freud had ever lit the darkness of my subconscious. Since that time I have continued to dream as I did before. But I forget them, or if I'm able to remember them, I don't understand even the first things about them. To explain the nature of my dreams wouldn't satisfy a Freudian analyst any more than a Jungian. I read Freud because I find him an excellent writer . . . a writer of police thrillers that can be followed with great passion. I also read Jung, who's interested in things of great interest to a writer, such as symbols and myths. Jung is not as good a writer as Freud. But, anyhow, I am interested in both of them.

INTERVIEWER

The images of *fortuna* and chance recur quite frequently in your fiction, from the shuffling of the tarot cards to the random distribution of manuscripts. Does the notion of chance play a role in the composition of your works?

CALVINO

My tarot book, *The Castle of Crossed Destinies,* is the most calculated of all I have written. Nothing in it is left to chance. I don't believe chance can play a role in my literature.

INTERVIEWER

How do you write? How do you perform the physical act of writing?

CALVINO

I write by hand, making many, many corrections. I would say I cross out more than I write. I have to hunt

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for words when I speak, and I have the same difficulty when writing. Then I make a number of additions, interpolations, which I write in a very tiny hand. There comes a moment when I myself can't read my handwriting, so I use a magnifying glass to figure out what I've written. I have two different handwritings. One is large, with fairly big letters: The *O*s and *A*s have a big hole in the center. This is the hand I use when I'm copying or when I'm rather sure of what I'm writing. My other hand corresponds to a less confident mental state and is very small: the *O*s are like dots. This is very hard to decipher, even for me.

My pages are always covered with canceling lines and revisions. There was a time when I made a number of handwritten drafts. Now, after the first draft, written by hand and completely scrawled over, I start typing it out, deciphering as I go. When I finally reread the typescript, I discover an entirely different text, which I often revise further. Then I make more corrections. On each page I try first to make my corrections with a typewriter; I then correct some more by hand. Often the page becomes so unreadable that I type it over a second time. I envy those writers who can proceed without correcting.

INTERVIEWER

Do you work every day or only on certain days and at certain hours?

CALVINO

In theory I would like to work every day. But in the morning I invent every possible excuse not to work: I have to go out, make some purchases, buy the newspaper. As a rule, I manage to waste the morning; so I end up sitting down to write in the afternoon. I'm a daytime writer, but since I waste the morning, I've become an afternoon writer. I could write at night, but when I do, I don't sleep. So I try to avoid that.

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INTERVIEWER

Do you always have a set task, something specific you decide to work on? Or do you have various things going on at once?

CALVINO

I always have a number of projects. I have a list of about twenty books I'd like to write; but then the moment comes when I decide I'm going to write *that* book. I'm only a novelist on occasion. Many of my books are made up of brief texts collected together, short stories; or else they are books that have an overall structure but are composed of various texts. Building a book around an idea is very important for me. I spend a lot of time constructing a book, making outlines that eventually prove to be of no use to me whatsoever. I throw them away. What determines the book is the writing, the material that's actually on the page.

I'm very slow getting started. If I have an idea for a novel, I find every conceivable pretext to not work on it. If I'm doing a book of stories, short texts, each one has its own starting time. Even with articles, I'm a slow starter. Even with articles for newspapers, every time I have the same trouble getting under way. Once I have started, then I can be quite fast. In other words, I write fast, but I have huge blank periods. It's a bit like the story of the great Chinese artist: the Emperor asked him to draw a crab, and the artist answered, "I need ten years, a great house, and twenty servants." The ten years went by, and the Emperor asked him for the drawing of the crab. "I need another two years," he said. Then he asked for a further week. And finally he picked up his pen and drew the crab in a moment, with a single, rapid gesture.

INTERVIEWER

Do you begin with a small group of unrelated ideas, or a larger conception which you gradually fill in?

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CALVINO

I start with a small, single image and then I enlarge it.

INTERVIEWER

Turgenev says, "I would rather have too little architecture than too much because that might interfere with the truth of what I say." Could you comment on this with reference to your writing?

CALVINO

It is true that in the past, say over the past ten years, the architecture of my books has had a very important place, perhaps too important. But only when I feel I have achieved a rigorous structure do I believe I have something that stands on its own two feet, a complete work. For example, when I began writing *Invisible Cities* I had only a vague idea of what the frame, the architecture of the book would be. But then, little by little, the design became so important that it carried the entire book; it became the plot of a book that had no plot. With *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* we can say the same—the architecture is the book itself. By then I had reached a level of obsession with structure such that I almost became crazy about it. It can be said about *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* that it could not have existed without a very precise, very articulated structure. I believe I have succeeded in this, which gives me a great satisfaction. Of course, all this kind of effort should not concern the reader at all. The important thing is to enjoy reading my book, independently of the work I have put into it.

INTERVIEWER

You live in several cities, moving fairly frequently from Rome to Paris to Turin, and also to this house near the sea. Does the place where you are influence the work you're doing?

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CALVINO

I don't think so. The experience of everyday life in a given place may influence what you are writing, but not the fact that you are writing here or there. At present I'm writing a book that to some extent is connected with this house in Tuscany where I've been spending the summer for several years. But I could go on with what I'm writing in some other place.

INTERVIEWER

Could you write in a hotel room?

CALVINO

I used to say that a hotel room was the ideal space: empty, anonymous. There's not a stack of letters to answer (or the remorse of not answering them); I don't have a lot of other tasks. In that sense, a hotel room really is ideal. But I find I need a space of my own, a lair, though I suppose if something is really clear in my mind, I could write it even in a hotel room.

INTERVIEWER

Do you travel with notes and papers?

CALVINO

Yes, I often carry notes around with me, and outlines. In the past ten years or so of my life outlines have become something of an obsession.

INTERVIEWER

Your parents were both scientists. Didn't they want to make a scientist of you, too?

CALVINO

My father was an agronomist; my mother, a botanist. They were profoundly concerned with the vegetable world, with nature, the natural sciences. But they became

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aware very early that I had no inclination in that direction—the usual reaction of children towards their parents. Now I regret that I didn't assimilate as much of their knowledge as I could have. My reaction may also have been partly due to the fact that my parents were older. I was born when my mother was forty and my father nearly fifty, so there was a great distance between us.

INTERVIEWER

When did you begin writing?

CALVINO

As an adolescent I had no idea what I wanted to be. I began writing fairly early. But before I had done any writing at all, my passion was drawing: I drew caricatures of my classmates, my teachers. Fanciful drawings, but with no training. When I was a little boy, my mother enrolled me in a correspondence drawing course; the first thing of mine ever published—I don't have a copy now and have been unable to find one—was a drawing. I was eleven years old. It appeared in a magazine published by this correspondence school; I was their youngest pupil. I wrote poems when I was very young. When I was around sixteen I tried to write pieces for the theater; it was my first passion, perhaps because during that period one of my links to the outside world was the radio, and I used to listen to many plays on the radio. So I started by writing—by trying to write—plays. Actually, for my plays and also some stories, I was the illustrator as well as the author. But when I began writing in earnest, I felt my drawing lacked any sort of style; I hadn't developed one. So I gave up drawing. Some people—during a meeting, for example—will doodle and make little drawings on a sheet of paper. I have trained myself not even to do that.

INTERVIEWER

Why did you abandon the theater?

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CALVINO

After the war the theater in Italy offered no models. Italian fiction was booming, and so I started writing fiction. I got to know a number of writers. Then I began to write novels. It is a matter of mental mechanisms. If one gets used to translating into a novel one's experiences, one's ideas, what one has to say becomes a novel; one is left with no raw materials for another form of literary expression. My way of writing prose is rather closer to the way a poet composes a poem. I am not a novelist who writes long novels. I concentrate an idea or an experience into a short synthetic text which goes side by side with other texts to form a series. I pay particular attention to expressions and words both with regard to their rhythms, their sounds and the images they evoke. I believe, for example, that *Invisible Cities* is a book whose place is between poetry and novel. If I were to write it completely in verse, it would be a prosaic, narrative type of poetry . . . or perhaps lyric poetry, because lyric poetry is the one I love the most and the kind I read from the great poets.

INTERVIEWER

How did you enter the literary world of Turin, the group that centered around the publishing firm of Giulio Einaudi and his authors like Cesare Pavese and Natalia Ginzburg? You were very young at the time.

CALVINO

I went to Turin almost by chance. My whole life really began after the war. Before that, I lived in San Remo, which is far removed from literary and cultural circles. When deciding to move, I hesitated between Turin and Milan; the two writers—both of them a decade older than I—who first read my things were Pavese, who lived in Turin, and Elio Vittorini, who lived in Milan. For a long time I couldn't choose between the two cities. Perhaps if I had chosen Milan, which is a more active, livelier

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city, things would have been different. Turin is a more serious, more austere place. The choice of Turin was, to some extent, an ethical one: I identified with its cultural and political tradition. Turin had been the city of the anti-Fascist intellectuals, and this appealed to that part of me fascinated by a kind of Protestant severity. It is the most Protestant city of Italy, an Italian Boston. Perhaps because of my surname [*Calvino* is Italian for Calvin], and perhaps because I come from a very austere family, I was predestined to make moralistic choices. When I was six, in San Remo, my very first elementary school was a private Protestant institution. The teachers stuffed me full of Scripture. So I have a certain internal conflict: I feel a kind of opposition toward the more carefree, slipshod Italy, which has made me identify with those Italian thinkers who believe that the country's misfortunes come from having missed the Protestant Reformation. On the other hand, my disposition is not at all that of a puritan. My surname is Calvino, but my given name, after all, is Italo.

INTERVIEWER

Do you find that today's youth has different characteristics from those of your youth? As you grow older, do you find yourself more inclined to dislike what young people do?

CALVINO

From time to time I get mad at young people; I think of long sermons which I then never deliver, first because I don't like to preach and secondly, nobody would listen to me. So there is not much left for me to do but continue to reflect on the difficulties of communicating with young people. Something happened between my generation and theirs. A continuity of experience has been interrupted; perhaps we lack common points of reference. But if I think back to my youth, the truth of the matter

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is that I didn't pay any attention to criticisms, reproaches and suggestions either. So I have no authority to speak today.

INTERVIEWER

You finally chose Turin and moved there. Did you immediately start working for Einaudi, the publishing firm?

CALVINO

Fairly soon. After Pavese introduced me to Giulio Einaudi and made him hire me, I was put in the advertising office. Einaudi had been a center of opposition to fascism. It had a background I was ready to make my own, even though I hadn't actually experienced it. It's hard for a foreigner to understand the way Italy is made up of a number of different centers, each with different traditions in their cultural history. I came from a nearby region, Liguria, that had almost no literary tradition; there wasn't a literary center. The writer who has no local literary tradition behind him feels himself a bit of an outsider. The big literary centers in Italy during the first part of the century were chiefly Florence, Rome, and Milan. The intellectual milieu in Turin, especially at Einaudi, was centered more on history and social problems than on literature. But all these things are important only in Italy. In subsequent years an international environment has always meant more to me . . . being Italian in the context of an international literature. Even in my tastes as a reader before I became a writer at all, I was interested in literature within a worldwide frame.

INTERVIEWER

Who were the writers you read with the greatest pleasure, and the ones who made the greatest impression on you?

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CALVINO

From time to time, when I reread books from my adolescence and young manhood, I am surprised to rediscover a part of myself that I seemed to have forgotten, though it has gone on acting inside of me. A while ago, for example, I reread *Saint Julien l'Hospitalier,* and I recalled how much it—with its view of the world of animals like a Gothic tapestry—influenced my early fiction. Certain writers I read as a boy, like Stevenson, have remained models of style for me, of lightness, narrative impetus and energy. The authors of my childhood reading, like Kipling and Stevenson, remain my models. Next to them I would place the Stendhal of *La Chartreuse de Parme.*

INTERVIEWER

With Pavese and the other writers of the house of Einaudi, you had also a literary comradeship, didn't you? You gave them your manuscripts to read and comment on.

CALVINO

Yes. At that time I was writing a lot of short stories, and I showed them to Pavese, to Natalia Ginzburg, who was a young writer also working there. Or else I took them to Vittorini in Milan, which is only two hours away from Turin. I paid attention to their opinions. At a certain point, Pavese said to me: "We know now that you can write short stories; you have to take the plunge and write a novel." I don't know whether this was good advice or not, because I was a short-story writer . . . if I had said everything I had to say in the form of stories I would have written a number of stories that I never actually did. Anyway, my first novel was published and it was a success. For several years I tried to write another. But the literary climate was already being defined as neo-realism, and it wasn't for me. In the end I went back

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to fantasy, and I managed to write *The Cloven Viscount* in which I really expressed myself. I say "went back" because that was probably my true nature. It was only the fact that I had experienced the war and the vicissitudes of the Italy of those years that allowed me, for a while, to work fairly happily in another direction until I "went back" and found a kind of invention that belonged to me.

INTERVIEWER

Are novelists liars? And if they are not, what kind of truth do they tell?

CALVINO

Novelists tell that piece of truth hidden at the bottom of every lie. To a psychoanalyst it is not so important whether you tell the truth or a lie because lies are as interesting, eloquent and revealing as any claimed truth.

I feel suspicious about writers who claim to tell the whole truth about themselves, about life, or about the world. I prefer to stay with the truths I find in writers who present themselves as the most bold-faced liars. My goal in writing *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler,* a novel entirely based on fantasy, was to find in this way a truth that I would have not been able to find otherwise.

INTERVIEWER

Do you believe that writers write what they can or rather what they should?

CALVINO

Writers write what they can. The act of writing is a function which becomes effective only if it allows one to express one's inner self. A writer feels several kinds of constraints—literary constraints such as the number of lines in a sonnet, or the rules of classical tragedy. These are part of the structure of the work within which the

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personality of the writer is free to express itself. But then there are social constraints such as religious, ethical, philosophical and political duties. These cannot be imposed directly on the work, but must be filtered through the writer's inner self. Only if they are part of the innermost personality of the writer can they find their place in the work without suffocating it.

INTERVIEWER

You once said that you would like to have written a story by Henry James. Are there any others you'd like to claim as your own?

CALVINO

Yes, I did mention *The Jolly Corner* once. What would I say now? I'll make quite a different answer: Adelbert von Chamisso's *Peter Schlemihl.*

INTERVIEWER

Were you influenced by Joyce or any of the modernists?

CALVINO

My author is Kafka, and my favorite novel is *Amerika.*

INTERVIEWER

You seem to feel closer to writers in English—Conrad, James, even Stevenson—than anyone in the Italian prose tradition. Is this the case?

CALVINO

I have always felt very attached to Giacomo Leopardi. Besides being a marvelous poet, he was also an extraordinary writer of prose of great style, humor, imagination, and profundity.

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INTERVIEWER

You've discussed the difference in the social status of American and Italian writers: Italian writers are more intimately connected with the publishing industry, whereas American ones are usually tied to academic institutions.

CALVINO

As the setting for a novel, the university—so frequent in American novels—is very dull (Nabokov is the one great exception), even duller than the publishing-firm setting in some Italian fiction.

INTERVIEWER

What about your work for Einaudi? Did that impinge on your creative activity?

CALVINO

Einaudi is a publisher who specializes in history, science, art, sociology, philosophy and classics. Fiction occupies the last place. Working there is like living in an encyclopedic world.

INTERVIEWER

The struggle between the man trying to be organized amidst randomness seems to be a theme that pervades much of your work. I'm thinking especially of *If on a Winter's Night* and the Reader, who keeps trying to find the next chapter of the book he's reading.

CALVINO

The conflict between the world's choices and man's obsession with making sense of them is a recurrent pattern in what I've written.

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INTERVIEWER

In your writing you have switched back and forth between realistic and fantastical modes of writing. Do you enjoy both equally?

CALVINO

When I write a book which is all invention, I feel a longing for writing that deals directly with daily life, my activities and my thoughts. At that moment the book I would like to be writing is the one that I am not. On the other hand, when I am writing something very autobiographical, tied to the particularities of everyday life, then my longing goes in the opposite direction. The book turns into the one of invention, with no apparent ties to myself and perhaps, for this very reason, is more sincere.

INTERVIEWER

How have your novels fared in America?

CALVINO

Invisible Cities is the one that has found the most admirers in the U.S. . . . surprisingly, as it is certainly not one of my easiest books. It isn't a novel but rather a collection of poems in prose. *Italian Folktales* was another success—once the book appeared in a complete translation twenty-five years after it was first published in Italy. While *Invisible Cities* was more successful with connoisseurs, men of letters, cultured people, *Italian Folktales* was what we could define as a public success. In the U.S. my image is that of a writer of fantasy, a writer of tales.

INTERVIEWER

Do you believe that Europe is overwhelmed by British and American culture?

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CALVINO

No. I share no chauvinistic reactions. The knowledge of foreign cultures is a vital element of any culture: I don't believe we can ever have enough of it. A culture must be open to foreign influences if it wants to keep its own creative power alive. In Italy, the most important cultural component has always been French literature. American literature, too, certainly left an imprint on me for life. Poe was one of my first interests; he taught me what a novel was. Later, I discovered that Hawthorne was sometimes greater than Poe. Sometimes, not always. Melville. A perfect novel, *Benito Cereno,* was even more valuable than *Moby Dick.* After all, my first apprenticeship was in the shadow of Cesare Pavese, the first Italian translator of Melville. Also among my first literary models have been such minor American writers of the end of the nineteenth century as Stephen Crane and Ambrose Bierce. The years of my literary development, the early forties, were dominated above all by Hemingway, Faulkner and Fitzgerald. At that time we experienced here in Italy a sort of infatuation with American literature. Even very minor authors like Saroyan, Caldwell and Cain were considered models of style. Then there was Nabokov, of whom I have become and still am, a fan. I must admit that my interest in American literature is somewhat driven by the desire to follow what occurs in a society that in some ways anticipates what will occur in Europe a few years later. In this sense, writers like Saul Bellow, Mary McCarthy, Gore Vidal are important because of their contact with society and which is expressed in the production of essays of quality.

At the same time I am always looking for new literary voices—the discovery of John Updike's novels in the mid-fifties.

INTERVIEWER

In the first, crucial post-war years, you lived almost continuously in Italy. And yet, with the exception of your

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novella *The Watcher,* your stories reflect little of the political situation of the country at the time, though personally you were much involved in politics.

CALVINO

The Watcher was to have been part of a trilogy, never completed, entitled *A Chronicle of the 1950s.* My formative years were the Second World War; in the years immediately following I tried to grasp the meaning of the terrible traumas I had lived through, especially the German occupation. So politics, in the first phase of my adult life, had great importance. In fact, I joined the Communist party, though the party in Italy was quite different from the Communist parties of other countries. I still felt obliged to accept many things far removed from my way of feeling. Later, I began to feel increasingly that the idea of constructing a true democracy in Italy using the model—or myth—of Russia became harder and harder to reconcile. The contradiction grew to such an extent that I felt totally cut off from the Communist world and, in the end, from politics. That was fortunate. The idea of putting literature in second place, after politics, is an enormous mistake, because politics almost never achieves its ideals. Literature, on the other hand, in its own field can achieve something and in the very long run can also have some practical effect. By now I have come to believe that important things are achieved only through very slow processes.

INTERVIEWER

In a country where nearly every major writer has written for the movies or even directed them, you seem to have resisted the lure of the cinema. Why and how?

CALVINO

As a young man, I was a great cinema fan, a great moviegoer. But I was always a spectator. The idea of moving to the other side of the screen has never attracted

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me much. Knowing how it's done removes a bit of the childish fascination that cinema has for me. I like Japanese and Swedish films precisely because they are so remote.

INTERVIEWER

Have you ever been bored?

CALVINO

Yes, in my childhood. But it must be pointed out that childhood boredom is a special kind of boredom. It is a boredom full of dreams, a sort of projection into another place, into another reality. In adulthood, boredom is made of repetition, it is the continuation of something from which we are no longer expecting any surprise. And I . . . would that I had time to get bored today! What I do have is the fear of repeating myself in my literary work. This is the reason that every time I must come up with a new challenge to face. I must find something to do that will look like a novelty, something a little beyond my capabilities.

—William Weaver
Damien Pettigrew

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Italo Calvino: A Memoir

Pietro Citati

Italo Calvino and I shared the same landscape: the Italian Riviera from Genoa to Menton, on the French border. We shared the rocks falling sheerly to the sea, hills covered with pine and olive trees, winter clumps of mimosa, the first fruits of the truck gardens and the blooms of the nurseries, crabs, the Easter cake—and then, just behind the olive trees, the sterile clay flats and the mysterious Apennines. And as soon as one passed through the town's gates, there were the *fasce,* the small strips on the stony, arid hills on which the peasants (retired sea captains and sailors, old boatswains but also lawyers repatriated from Argentina) built small, dry stone walls, obtained water from who-knows-what source, and then, as a hobby, grew a few tomatoes, string beans and pumpkins. Everything was small, limited, obtained from the minimal, with an ingenuity sharpened by the lack of resources.

Both Calvino and I owned several of these strips—his, I suppose, were larger—and many, many times, when we were young, we talked about that corner of Liguria with the love one has for one's home. It is impossible to understand Calvino without this mental landscape, this love

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for small forms. They were his true wealth. Gradually, as the years passed, he grew increasingly to love the short story, the prose poem, the moral parable, the metaphysical tale, the caprice, the miniature, the ex-voto. Perhaps these "small forms"—from Petrarch to Leopardi's *Operette Morali*—constitute the essence of Italian genius: sharply limned, concentrated, abstract, realized with the greatest economy of means and an extreme wealth of resonant implication. Like the great Persian poets, who constructed immense poems by fitting together small, invisible tales, Calvino had learned the art of the interlaced plot and its reflection: these "small forms" illuminated each other, suggesting allusions and perspectives and labile, infinite architectures. I do not know what he would have written in the lost future, but I have always imagined that with his ductile and ingenious hands, using his little colored stones, he would have composed cosmogonies and cosmologies.

•

When I met him he was twenty-four, and whenever I think of him as he was then I smile. He was enchanting. He walked through the streets of gray Turin dressed like an immigrant from Haiti or Santo Domingo in sandals and colored sweaters in the heart of autumn or at the beginning of winter. He was shy, like a boy from the provinces who had moved to the metropolis. He had an inferiority complex induced by an eccentric family; every so often a rolling of his eyes, a mock rhetorical change of tone in his voice, a movement of his hand brought back to mind the fact that he did not belong to Eugenio Montale's stark Liguria but to the mythomaniac, exuberant, gossipy and Masonic Liguria of the other Riviera. What fascinated me above all was his swiftness and lightness. He had a very fresh and incredibly precise gaze, an agile mind, a love of the straight line, an elegant ability as a stylist. Living in Turin, which imagined itself stoic and geometrical, he had built himself a stoic armor, and

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from behind this cuirass, polished until it shone, he watched the world's spectacle, always from a slant, or from the heights of the humming and leafy forest that once had covered Europe.

He was very funny. Many were the times I laughed with him. Many were the times that, affectionately, I laughed about him. He often fell in love, or thought he fell in love, or pretended to fall in love. Involved, almost always, were Bogus Countesses who taught him good manners (though his manners were better than theirs), forced him to go to very expensive restaurants and to drink Veuve Cliquot though he was poor and stingy. He adored them and suffered as he listened to the sumptuous, swirling truths descending from above. Until one day he understood that he had wasted his heart and his time and suddenly he ran away. He arrived in Rome with a frightened look in his eyes, stayed in unknown hotels, gave his phone number to no one . . . while the Bogus Countess pursued him across Italy with a revolver in her purse, reading aloud to friends in the cooing tones of a stabbed dove the three thousand love letters he had written her.

I've always wondered whether Calvino had feelings. Certainly he was one of the most *faithful* men I ever knew—faithful to friends and publishers who did not always deserve his faith. He never liked to talk about psychology. People's characters and portraits did not interest him. His judgment of men was abrupt: they were intelligent or stupid, wrote good or bad books; everything in a novel that forms its bulk or psychological fire did not attract him. He mistrusted emotions; in the great mishmash of the human heart there was always something that might strike and wound him. I'm certain that sometimes he thought of replacing the heart—that coarse organ—with something else that he would find through his ingenious investigations, some organ no less ardent and pure, but crystalline, like a mathematical truth.

I also wondered whether behind the deep line that furrowed the middle of his brow he possessed an ego. I

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have never known anyone so non-aggressive in his nature. He always tended to justify, to understand, to explain away offenses. During the years of maturity, with discretion, elegance and understatement he seemed to disappear from the world as if "I" repelled him. In his last books he revealed an almost obsessive panic at existing and yet not existing; while he tried to multiply himself like a mythical figure, he fled from himself. If, occasionally, he seemed to defend his "I," it was because he risked losing himself in the labyrinth of mirrors. In the end, as happens with many great writers, he became a collective being—a kind of receptacle: uncertain, perplexed, restless, subject to the slightest suggestions of the atmosphere, perturbed by the walls of his house, and reflections: the lord of only a kingdom of shadows.

When I first met Calvino, he knew few books. In those days people were beginning to read Robert Musil, Nabokov, Dylan Thomas, Carlo Emilio Gadda, Boris Pasternak: the last great flowering of Western literature. Calvino did not like Musil, Nabokov, Gadda, nor *Dr. Zhivago* nor *Under Milk Wood*. Like General Stumm von Bordwehr, he sensed enemies everywhere: the danger of the void, the labyrinth, the sea of objectivity; he studied battle lines, maneuvers of defense and encirclement, dug trenches, set up barbed wire entanglements, deployed his frail troops in their uniforms and small colored caps. I became annoyed with him. But I was wrong. Calvino was not a critic. He was under no obligation to be objective about anyone. His sole duty was to defend his delightful world of tissue paper and soft lights.

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What happened afterwards I would not know exactly how to recount. In a few years the enchanting minor writer who had imagined "Our Ancestors" became the major Italian narrator of the latter twentieth century. This was a long metamorphosis that unfolded almost in the dark, in the imaginary laboratories of experimental literature. His reading had become more mature. Now

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he read Musil and Paul Valéry—precisely the books that as a young man he had detested—and Petrarch, Kafka, Proust, Eugenio Montale, whom at one time, distracted and absent-minded, he had passed by. Everything he read, even the most extraneous things, entered his bloodstream. By now he was only literature: a literature-man as one can be a man of faith or a businessman, and yet with the same naturalness with which the tall pine trees in his garden sucked nourishment from the soil and spread their branches over him.

His landscape changed. If he had lived in Paris like an alien, or in Rome like a guest, now his true home was the pine grove of Roccamare, near Castiglione della Pescaia, which in some ways was a repetition of the Ligurian landscape of his youth. Here too, everything was limited: a strip of sand enclosed between two promontories, a pine grove, a small garden where everything seemed miniaturized. He wrote high up in the house in a small study reached by a small, extremely perilous stairway, as though in an aerial chicken coop or dovecote. Below his feet, his wife talked with her friends or the maid. Delivery boys came and went, friends arrived; he went on writing, immersed in the noises of existence, watching over the house like a stork. Though he never said no to things, by now he had profoundly distanced himself from reality, enclosed in his world of frail shadows. Between himself and others he had placed his wife; she was expected to tell him about everything: what faces the other men had, what was happening in the pine grove, the shadows cast by the trees, what smells crossed the meadow, what tastes the food had, the sounds of the music. High up there like a bee he received the nectar his wife collected and deposited in the delicate hive of his mind.

His mind became the most complicated, enveloping, sinuous mind any modern Italian writer ever possessed. Writing, for Calvino, meant putting ideas in motion—because, as Proust said, quoting Leonardo, literature was

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a *mental matter*. But falling into an idea was like plunging into an abyss, an infinite maelstrom. Each time he ran the danger of being overwhelmed. Nothing was certain—only a hypothesis in the search for meaning: an hypothesis that developed into new conjectures, further possibilities that often ended in the impossible. If at one time he had loved the obstinate single-mindedness of the straight line, now he preferred intertwinings—tortuous, ramified lines. Once the rhythm was rapid and adventurous; now it was slow, cautious, meticulous, erased, added, retouched, contradictory. Every theme branched out in a profusion of variations echoing with endless resonances.

How simple the intellectual motivations of his youth, when he had believed in the stark play of opposites, must have appeared to him! Now he was obsessed with the double infinite, the infinitely small and the infinitely large that corrodes all thought . . . the necessary interweaving of every affirmation with every negation; the indissoluble relationship between all things and the relationships between these relationships—the long reflection of the complicated echo that all our words and actions awaken. Calvino felt he was on the brink of illusion, of vertigo, of the impossibility of speaking and writing. He had never been a tragic writer, and now he was discovering that the true tragedy of literature is not in the passions but in the workings of the mind. Tragic though Anna Karenina's death in the railroad station at Obiralovka may be, it is nothing compared to the tragedy of the double infinite. Like all good craftsmen he had always been proud of knowing his literary motives and procedures. But precisely now, as he wrote "mental things," ideas took him to places completely new to him, and that at times filled him with terror.

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Then, too swiftly, the last years descended upon the pine grove. Turning his back on all general ideas, Calvino was content to contemplate a wave, a tuft of grass

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in the garden, a singing bird; the contemplation of the minimal awakened in him a perplexity so radical that it prevented him from experiencing an emotion, sharing an idea, discerning the shape of an object, from simply saying: "This thing is," or "I exist." Perhaps—I asked myself—there no longer *was* anything; he had silently ceased to exist without our becoming aware of it.

His last summer was difficult. He was writing his American lectures (later collected in *The Uses of Literature*), a most beautiful book, the *ars poetica* of our end of the century, in which ancient and modern literature reflect each other in a pellucid mirror. He was not in a good mood. He thought he was wasting his time. He was a writer, he must give form to the dozens of stories that swarmed in his head, not reflect upon literature. He no longer left the house. Closed away in his lofty dovecote, he no longer swam in the sea.

In the first days of December, 1985, the lectures were almost finished, even though for him they already belonged to a bygone time. During those last days I saw him twice. He was tender, affectionate, amusing, almost happy. He even went so far as to kiss my wife on the cheek—how rarely those abstract and reserved Ligurian lips had bent to touch the cheek of a friend! I went to sleep filled with joy. There was no reason for apprehension. *Mr. Palomar* had been an episode like all those for whom literature is a *mental matter*, Calvino thought that each book of his must be a new project that would impose on the world an unexpected form. He had lived the project of his imaginary astronomer to the very depths. He had left it behind, and now as he returned home in the night he undoubtedly was thinking of other imaginary forms he would live for some time.

But then there was nothing more . . . only his crash to the ground, the race of the ambulance to Siena, the horrible hospital where I had experienced other deaths, the anguished faces of the doctors, the useless operation, the futile observations, the waiting, the bandaged head,

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the small grave above the sea of Castiglione. One morning to comfort us, the doctors told us that everything had gone well—Italo's was a congenital cerebral malformation; he should have died at the age of twenty-five or thirty at the latest. Think of the time he had gained. Think of the books he had written at his sailor-peasant gait, forging across the sterile clay flats.

How wise he had been at stealing time—the only wealth that matters—from the gods who trifle with us. I told myself that perhaps not even he knew that he was fragile. He had eluded his own fragility with patience, work, discretion, and the aid of the sorceress who transforms fragility into strength, and strength into fragility: literature.

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I never dream. Two years later Italo appeared to me in a dream. His forehead was still bandaged, but the smile was the luminous smile of the last night. He said, "You know it's all been a mistake. The doctors did not understand. I did not die." And he had the air of revealing a secret to me—a small, negligible secret that I was supposed to communicate to a very few friends. The meaning of the dream was clear: I could not tolerate the fact that he was dead. But the dream said something more; it was—how could I be mistaken?—a message from the Elysian fields. It said that the tragic is not the essential form of the world, and that there never is an ultimate tragedy. Behind it there is another veil, then another veil, and then another veil yet, and this deceptive play of forms where many lights and shadows interweave is the only thing that we know.

—translated from the Italian
by Raymond Rosenthal

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Terrific Mother

Lorrie Moore

Although she had been around them her whole life, it was when she reached thirty-five that holding babies seemed to make her nervous—just at the beginning, a twinge of stage fright swinging up from the gut. "Adrienne, would you like to hold the baby? Would you mind?" Always these words from a woman her age looking kind and beseeching—a former friend, she was losing her friends to babble and beseech—and Adrienne would force herself to breathe deep. Holding a baby was no longer natural—she was no longer natural—but a test of womanliness and earthly skills. She was being observed. People looked to see how she would do it. She had entered a puritanical decade, a demographic moment—whatever it was—when the best compliment you could get was: You would make a terrific mother. The wolf whistle of the nineties.

So when she was at the Spearsons' Labor Day picnic, and when Sally Spearson had handed her the baby, Adrienne had burbled at it as she would a pet, had jostled the child gently, made clicking noises with her tongue,

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affectionately cooing, "Hello punkinhead, hello my little punkinhead," had reached to shoo a fly away and, amidst the smells of old grass and the fatty crackle of the barbecue, lost her balance when the picnic bench, dowels rotting in the joints, wobbled and began to topple her—the bench! The wobbly picnic bench was toppling her! And when she fell backward, spraining her spine—in the slowed quickness of this flipping world she saw the clayey clouds, some frozen faces, one lone star like the nose of a jet—and when the baby's head hit the stone retaining wall of the Spearsons' newly terraced yard and bled fatally into the brain, Adrienne went home shortly thereafter, after the hospital and the police reports, and did not leave her attic apartment for seven months, and there were fears, deep fears for her, on the part of Martin Porter, the man she had been dating, and on the part of almost everyone, including Sally Spearson who phoned tearfully to say that she forgave her, that Adrienne might never come out.

Those months were dark and cavernous with mourning. Martin Porter usually visited her bringing a pepper cheese or a Casbah couscous cup; he had become her only friend. He was divorced and worked as a research economist, though he looked more like a Scottish lumberjack—graying hair, red-flecked beard, a favorite flannel shirt in green and gold. He was getting ready to take a trip abroad. "We could get married," he suggested. That way, he said, Adrienne could accompany him to northern Italy, to a villa in the Alps set up for scholars and academic conferences. She could be a spouse. They gave spouses studios to work in. Some studios had pianos. Some had desks or potter's wheels. "You can do whatever you want." He was finishing the second draft of a study of first world imperialism's impact on third world monetary systems. "You could paint. Or not. You could not paint."

She looked at him closely, hungrily, then turned away.

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She still felt clumsy and big, a beefy killer in a cage, in need of the thinning prison food. "You love me, don't you," she said. She had spent the better part of seven months napping in a leotard, an electric fan blowing at her, her left ear catching the wind, capturing it there in her head, like the sad sea in a shell. She felt clammy and doomed. "Or do you just feel sorry for me?" She swatted at a small swarm of gnats that had appeared suddenly out of an abandoned can of Coke.

"I don't feel sorry for you."

"You don't?"

"I *feel* for you. I've grown to love you. We're grown-ups here. One grows to do things." He was a practical man. He often referred to the annual departmental cocktail party as "standing around getting paid."

"I don't think, Martin, that we can get married."

"Of course we can get married." He unbuttoned his cuffs as if to roll up his sleeves.

"You don't understand. Normal life is no longer possible for me. I've stepped off all the normal paths and am living in the bushes. I'm a bushwoman now. I don't feel that I can have the normal things. Marriage is a normal thing. You need the normal courtship, the normal proposal." She couldn't think what else. Water burned her eyes. She waved a hand dismissively, and it passed through her field of vision like something murderous and huge.

"Normal courtship, normal proposal," Martin said. He took off his shirt and pants and shoes. He lay on the bed in just his socks and underwear and pressed the length of his body against her. "I'm going to marry you, whether you like it or not." He took her face into his hands and looked longingly at her mouth. "I'm going to marry you til you puke."

They were met at Malpensa by a driver who spoke little English but who held up a sign that said VILLA HIRSCHBORN, and when Adrienne and Martin approached him, he nodded and said, "Hello, *buon giorno.*

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Signor Porter?" The drive to the villa took two hours, uphill and down, through the countryside and several small villages, but it wasn't until the driver pulled up to the precipitous hill he called *La Madre Vertiginoso,* and the villa's iron gates somehow opened automatically then closed behind them, it wasn't until then, winding up the drive past the spectacular gardens and the sunny vineyard and the terraces of the stucco outbuildings, that it occurred to Adrienne that Martin's being invited here was a great honor. He had won this *thing,* and he got to live here for a month.

"Does this feel like a honeymoon?" she asked him.

"A what? Oh, a honeymoon. Yes." He turned and patted her thigh indifferently.

He was jet-lagged. That was it. She smoothed her skirt, which was wrinkled and damp. "Yes, I can see us growing old together," she said, squeezing his hand. "In the next few weeks, in fact." If she ever got married again, she would do it properly. The awkward ceremony, the embarrassing relatives, the cumbersome, ecologically unsound gifts. She and Martin had simply gone to City Hall, and then asked their family and friends not to send presents but to donate money to Greenpeace. Now, however, as they slowed before the squashed-nosed stone lions at the entrance of the villa, its perfect border of forget-me-nots and yews, its sparkling glass door, Adrienne gasped. *Whales,* she thought quickly. *Whales* got my crystal.

The upstairs "Principessa" room, which they were ushered into by a graceful, bilingual butler named Carlo, was elegant and huge—a piano, a large bed, dressers stenciled with festoons of fruit. There was maid service twice a day, said Carlo. There were sugar wafers, towels, mineral water and mints. There was dinner at eight, breakfast until nine. When Carlo bowed and departed, Martin kicked off his shoes and sank into the ancient, tapestried chaise. "I've heard these 'fake' quattrocento paintings on the wall are fake for tax purposes only," he whispered. "If you know what I mean."

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"Really," said Adrienne. She felt like one of the workers taking over the Winter Palace. Her own voice sounded booming. "You know, Mussolini was captured around here. Think about it."

Martin looked puzzled. "What do you mean?"

"That he was around here. That they captured him. I don't know. I was reading the little book on it. Leave me alone." She flopped down on the bed. Martin was changing already. He'd been better when they were just dating, with the pepper cheese. She let her face fall deep into the pillow, her mouth hanging open like a dog's, and then she slept until six, dreaming that a baby was in her arms but that it turned into a stack of plates, which she had to juggle, tossing them into the air.

A loud sound awoke her. A falling suitcase. Everyone had to dress for dinner, and Martin was yanking things out, groaning his way into a jacket and tie. Adrienne got up, bathed and put on pantyhose which, because it had been months since she had done so, twisted around her leg like the stripe on a barber pole.

"You're walking as if you'd torn a ligament," said Martin, locking the door to their room, as they were leaving.

Adrienne pulled at the knees of the hose, but couldn't make them work. "Tell me you like my skirt, Martin, or I'm going to have to go back in and never come out again."

"I like your skirt. It's great. You're great. I'm great," he said, like a conjugation. He took her arm and they limped their way down the curved staircase (Was it sweeping? Yes! It was sweeping!) to the dining room, where Carlo ushered them in to find their places at the table. The seating arrangement at the tables would change nightly, Carlo said in a clipped Italian accent, "to assist the cross-pollination of ideas."

"Excuse me?" said Adrienne.

There were about thirty-five people, all of them middle aged, with the academic's strange, mixed expression

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of merriment and weariness. "A cross between flirtation and a fender bender," Martin had described it once. Adrienne's place was at the opposite side of the room from him, between a historian writing a book on a monk named Jaocim de Flore and a musicologist who had devoted his life to a quest for "the earnest andante." Everyone sat in elaborate wooden chairs, the backs of which were carved with gargoylish heads that poked up from behind either shoulder of the sitter, like a warning.

"De Flore," said Adrienne, at a loss, turning from her carpaccio to the monk man. "Doesn't that mean 'of the flower'?" She had recently learned that *disaster* meant "bad star" and she was looking for an opportunity to brandish and bronze this tidbit in conversation.

The monk man looked at her. "Are you one of the spouses?"

"Yes," she said. She looked down then back up. "But then so is my husband."

"You're not a screenwriter, are you?"

"No," she said. "I'm a painter. Actually more of a printmaker. Actually, more of a—right now I'm in transition."

He nodded and dug back into his food. "I'm always afraid they're going to start letting *screenwriters* in here."

There was an arugula salad, and osso bucco for the main course. She turned now to the musicologist. "So you usually find them insincere? The andantes?" She looked quickly out over the other heads to give Martin a fake and girlish wave.

"It's the use of the minor seventh," sniffed the musicologist. "So fraudulent and replete."

"If the food wasn't so good, I'd leave now," she said to Martin. They were lying in bed, in their carpeted skating rink of a room. It could be weeks, she knew, before they'd have sex here. *"So fraudulent and replete,"* she said in a high nasal voice the likes of which Martin had heard only once before, in a departmental meeting chaired by an embittered, interim chair who did imita-

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tions of colleagues not in the room. "Can you even use the word *replete* like that?"

"As soon as you get settled in your studio, you'll feel better," said Martin, beginning to fade. He groped under the covers to find her hand and clasp it.

"I want a divorce," whispered Adrienne.

"I'm not giving you one," he said, bringing her hand up to his chest and placing it there, like a medallion, like a necklace of sleep, and then he began softly to snore, the quietest of radiators.

They were given bagged lunches and told to work well. Martin's studio was a modern glass cube in the middle of one of the gardens. Adrienne's was a musty stone hut twenty minutes farther up the hill and out onto the wooded headland, along a dirt path where small darting lizards sunned. She unlocked the door with the key she had been given, went in, and immediately sat down and ate the entire bagged lunch—quickly, compulsively, though it was only nine-thirty in the morning. Two apples, some cheese, and a jam sandwich. "A jelly bread," she said aloud, holding up the sandwich, scrutinizing it under the light.

She set her sketch pad on the work table and began a morning full of killing spiders and drawing their squashed and tragic bodies. The spiders were star shaped, hairy, and scuttling like crabs. They were fallen stars. Bad stars. They were earth's animal-try at heaven. Often she had to step on them twice—they were large and ran fast. Stepping on them once usually just made them run faster.

It was the careless universe's work she was performing, death itchy, and about like a cop. Her personal fund of mercy for the living was going to get used up in dinner conversation at the villa. She had no compassion to spare, only a pencil and a shoe.

"Art *trouvé?*" said Martin, toweling himself dry from his shower, as they dressed for the evening cocktail hour.

"Spider *trouvé,*" she said. "A delicate, aboriginal dish." Martin let out a howling laugh that alarmed her.

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She looked at him, then looked down at her shoes. He needed her. Tomorrow she would have to go down into town and find a pair of sexy Italian sandals that showed the cleavage of her toes. She would have to take him dancing. They would have to hold each other and lead each other back to love or they'd go nuts here. They'd grow mocking and arch and violent. One of them would stick a foot out, and the other would trip. That sort of thing.

At dinner she sat next to a medievalist who had just finished his sixth book on *The Canterbury Tales.*

"Sixth," repeated Adrienne.

"There's a lot there," he said defensively.

"I'm sure," she said.

"I read deep," he added. "I read hard."

"How nice for you."

He looked at her narrowly. "Of course, *you* probably think I should write a book about Cat Stevens." She nodded neutrally. "I see," he said.

For dessert Carlo was bringing in a white chocolate torte, and she decided to spend most of the coffee and dessert time talking about it. Desserts like these are born, not made, she would say. She was already practicing, rehearsing for courses. "I mean," she said to the Swedish physicist on her left, "until today, my feeling about white chocolate, was: Why? What was the point? You might as well have been eating goddamn *wax.*" She had her elbow on the table, her hand up near her face, and she looked anxiously past the physicist to smile at Martin at the other end of the long table. She waved her fingers in the air like bug legs.

"Yes, of course," said the physicist, frowning. "You must be—well, are you one of the *spouses?*"

She began in the mornings to gather with some of the other spouses—they were going to have little tank tops printed up—in the music room for exercise. This way she could avoid hearing words like *Heideggerian* and *ideological* at breakfast; it always felt too early in the morning for

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those words. The women pushed back the damask sofas, and cleared a space on the rug where all of them could do little hip and thigh exercises, led by the wife of the Swedish physicist. Up, down, up down.

"I guess this relaxes you," said the white-haired woman next to her.

"Bourbon relaxes you," said Adrienne. "This carves you."

"Bourbon carves you," said a redhead from Brazil.

"You have to go visit this person down in the village," whispered the white haired woman. She wore a Spalding sporting goods T-shirt.

"What person?"

"Yes, what person?" asked the blonde.

The white-haired woman stopped and handed both of them a card from the pocket of her shorts. "She's an American masseuse. A couple of us have started going. She takes lire or dollars, doesn't matter. You have to phone a couple days ahead."

Adrienne stuck the card in her waistband. "Thanks," she said, and resumed moving her leg up and down like a toll gate.

For dinner there was *tachino a la scala.* "I wonder how you make this?" Adrienne said aloud.

"My dear," said the French historian on her left. "You must never ask. Only wonder." He then went on to disparage sub-altered intellectualism and dormant tropes.

"Yes," said Adrienne, "dishes like these do have about them a kind of *omnihistorical reality.* At least it seems like that to me." She turned quickly.

To her right sat a cultural anthropologist who had just come back from China where she had studied the infanticide.

"Yes," said Adrienne. "The infanticide."

"They are on the edge of something horrific there. It is the whole future, our future as well, and something terrible is going to happen to them. One feels it."

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"How awful," said Adrienne. She could not do the mechanical work of eating, of knife and fork, up and down. She let her knife and fork rest against each other on the plate.

"A woman has to apply for a license to have a baby. Everything is bribes and rations. We went for hikes up into the mountains, and we didn't see a single bird, a single animal. Everything, over the years, has been eaten."

Adrienne felt a light weight on the inside of her arm vanish and return, vanish and return, like the history of something, like the story of all things. "Where are you from ordinarily?" asked Adrienne. She couldn't place the accent.

"Munich," said the woman. "Land of *Oktoberfest.*" She dug into her food in an exasperated way then turned back toward Adrienne to smile a little formally. "I grew up watching all these grown people in green felt throwing up in the street."

Adrienne smiled back. This was how she would learn about the world, in sentences at meals; other people's distillations amidst her own vague pain, dumb with itself. This, for her, would be knowledge—a shifting to hear, an emptying of her arms, other people's experiences walking through the bare rooms of her brain, looking for a place to sit.

"Me?" she too often said, "I'm just a dropout from Sue Bennet College." And people would nod politely and only sometimes ask, "Where's that?"

The next morning in her room she sat by the phone and stared. Martin had gone to his studio; his book was going fantastically well, he said, which gave Adrienne a sick, abandoned feeling—of being unhappy and unsupportive—which made her think she was not even one of the spouses. Who was she? The opposite of a mother. The opposite of a spouse.

She was Spider Woman.

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She picked up the phone, got an outside line, dialed the number of the masseuse on the card.

"Pronto," said the voice on the other end.

"Yes, hello, *per favore, parle anglese?"*

"Oh, yes," said the voice. "I'm from Minnesota."

"No, kidding," said Adrienne. She lay back and searched the ceiling for talk. "I once subscribed to a haunted-house newsletter published in Minnesota," she said.

"Yes," said the voice a little impatiently. "Minnesota is full of haunted-house newsletters."

"I once lived in a haunted house," said Adrienne. "In college. Me and five roommates."

The masseuse cleared her throat confidentially. "Yes. I was once called on to cast the demons from a haunted house. But how can I help you today?"

Adrienne said, "You were?"

"Were? Oh, the house, yes. When I got there, all the place needed was to be cleaned. So I cleaned it. Washed the dishes and dusted."

"Yup," said Adrienne. "Our house was haunted that way, too."

There was a strange silence in which Adrienne, feeling something tense and moist in the room, began to fiddle with the bagged lunch on the bed, nervously pulling open the sandwiches, sensing that, if she turned just then, the phone cradled in her neck, the baby would be there, behind her, a little older now, a toddler, walked toward her in a ghostly way by her own dead parents, a nativity scene corrupted by error and dream.

"How can I help you today?" the masseuse asked again, firmly.

Help? Adrienne wondered abstractly, and remembered how in certain countries, instead of a tooth fairy, there were such things as tooth spiders. How the tooth spider could steal your children, mix them up, bring you a changeling child, a child that was changed.

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"I'd like to make an appointment for Thursday," she said. "If possible. Please."

For dinner there was *vongole in umido,* the rubbery, wine-steamed meat prompting commentary about mollusk versus crustacean anatomy. Adrienne sighed and chewed. Over cocktails there had been a long discussion of peptides and rabbit tests.

"Now lobsters, you know, have what is called a hemipenis," said the man next to her. He was a marine biologist, an epidemiologist, or an anthropologist. She'd forgotten which.

"Hemi-penis." Adrienne scanned the room a little frantically.

"Yes." He grinned. "Not a term one particularly wants to hear in an intimate moment, of course."

"No," said Adrienne, smiling back. She paused. "Are you one of the spouses?"

Someone on his right grabbed his arm, and he now turned in that direction to say why yes he did know Professor so-and-so . . . and wasn't she in Brussels last year giving a paper at the hermeneutics conference?

There came *castagne al porto* and coffee. The woman to Adrienne's left finally turned to her, placing the cup down on the saucer with a sharp clink.

"You know, the chef has AIDS," said the woman.

Adrienne froze a little in her chair. "No, I didn't know." Who was this woman?

"How does that make you feel?"

"Pardon me?"

"How does that make you feel?" She enunciated slowly, like a reading teacher.

"I'm not sure," said Adrienne, scowling at her chestnuts. "Certainly worried for us if we should lose him."

The woman smiled. "Very interesting." She reached underneath the table for her purse and said, "Actually, the chef doesn't have AIDS—at least not that I'm aware

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of. I'm just taking a kind of survey to test people's reactions to AIDS, homosexuality and general notions of contagion. I'm a sociologist. It's part of my research. I just arrived this afternoon. My name is Marie-Claire."

Adrienne turned back to the hemi-penis man. "Do you think the people here are mean?" she asked.

He smiled at her in a fatherly way. "Of course," he said. There was a long silence with some chewing in it. "But the place *is* pretty as a postcard."

"Yeah, well," said Adrienne, "I never send those kinds of postcards. No matter where I am I always send the kind with the little cat jokes on them."

He placed his hand briefly on her shoulder. "We'll find you some cat jokes." He scanned the room in a bemused way and then looked at his watch.

She had bonded in a state of emergency, like an infant bird. But perhaps it would be soothing, this marriage. Perhaps it would be like a nice warm bath. A nice warm bath in a tub flying off a roof.

At night she and Martin seemed almost like husband and wife, spooned against each other in a forgetful sort of love—a cold, still heaven through which a word or touch might explode like a moon, then disappear, unremembered. She moved her arms to place them around him, and he felt so big there, huge, filling her arms.

The white-haired woman who had given her the masseuse card was named Kate Spalding, the wife of the monk man, and in the morning she asked Adrienne to go jogging. They met by the lions, Kate once more sporting a Spalding T-shirt, and then they headed out over the gravel, toward the gardens. "It's pretty as a postcard here, isn't it?" said Kate. Out across the lake the mountains seemed to preside over the minutiae of the terra cotta villages nestled below. It was May and the Alps were losing their snowy caps, nurses letting their hair down. The air was warming. Anything could happen.

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Adrienne sighed. "But do you think people have *sex* here?"

Kate smiled. "You mean casual sex? Among the guests?"

Adrienne felt annoyed. "*Casual* sex? No, I don't mean *casual* sex. I'm talking about difficult, randomly profound, Sears and Roebuck sex. I'm talking marital."

Kate laughed in a sharp, barking sort of way, which for some reason hurt Adrienne's feelings.

Adrienne tugged on her socks. "I don't believe in casual sex." She paused. "I believe in casual marriage."

"Don't look at me," said Kate. "I married my husband because I was deeply in love with him."

"Yeah, well," said Adrienne. "I married my husband because I thought it would be a great way to meet guys."

Kate smiled now in a real way. Her white hair was grandmotherly, but her face was youthful and tan, and her teeth shone generous and wet, the creamy incisors curved as cashews.

"I'd tried the whole single thing but it just wasn't working," Adrienne added, running in place.

Kate stepped close and massaged Adrienne's neck. Her skin was lined and papery. "You haven't been to see Ilke from Minnesota yet, have you?"

Adrienne feigned perturbance. "Do I seem that tense, that lost, that . . ." and here she let her arms splay spastically. "I'm going tomorrow."

"He was a beautiful child, didn't you think?" In bed Martin held her until he rolled away, clasped her hand and fell asleep. At least there was that: a husband sleeping next to a wife, a nice husband sleeping close. It meant something to her. She could see how through the years it would gather power, its socially sanctioned animal comfort, its night life a dreamy dance about love. She lay awake and remembered when her father had at last grown so senile and ill that her mother could no longer sleep in the same bed with him—the mess, the smell—

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and had had to move him, diapered and rank, to the guest room next door. Her mother had cried, to say this farewell to a husband. To at last lose him like this, banished and set aside like a dead man, never to sleep with him again: she had wept like a baby. His actual death she took less hard. At the funeral she was grim and dry and invited everyone over for a quiet, elegant tea. By the time two years had passed, and she herself was diagnosed with cancer, her sense of humor had returned a little. "The silent killer," she would say, with a wink. "The *silent killer.*" She got a kick out of repeating it, though no one knew what to say in response, and at the very end she kept clutching the nurses' hems to ask, "Why is no one visiting me?" No one lived that close, explained Adrienne. No one lived that close to anyone.

Adrienne set her spoon down. "Isn't this soup *interesting?*" she said to no one in particular. *"Zup-pa mari-ta-ta!"* Marriage soup. She decided it was perhaps a little like marriage itself: a good idea that, like all ideas, lived awkwardly on earth.

"You're not a poetess, I hope," said the English geologist next to her. "We had a poetess here last month, and things got a bit dodgy here for the rest of us."

"Really." After the soup there was risotto with squid ink.

"Yes. She kept referring to insects as 'God's typos' and then she kept us all after dinner one evening so she could read from her poems, which seemed to consist primarily of the repeating line, 'The hairy kiwi of his balls.' "

"Hairy kiwi," repeated Adrienne, searching the phrase for a sincere andante. She had written a poem once herself. It had been called "Garbage Night in the Fog" and was about a long sad walk she'd taken once on garbage night.

The geologist smirked a little at the risotto, waiting for Adrienne to say something more, but she was now watching Martin at the other table. He was sitting next to the

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sociologist she'd sat next to the previous night, and as Adrienne watched she saw Martin glance, in a sickened way, from the sociologist, back to his plate, then back to the sociologist. "The *cook?*" he said loudly, then dropped his fork and pushed his chair from the table.

The sociologist was frowning. "You flunk," she said.

"I'm going to see this masseuse tomorrow." Martin was on his back on the bed, and Adrienne was straddling his hips, usually one of their favorite ways to converse. One of the Mandy Patinkin tapes she'd brought was playing on the cassette player.

"The masseuse. Yes, I've heard," said Martin.

"You have?"

"Sure, they were talking about it at dinner last night."

"Who was?" She was already feeling possessive, alone.

"Oh, one of them," said Martin, smiling and waving his hand dismissively.

"Them," said Adrienne coldly. "You mean one of the spouses, don't you. Why are all the spouses here women? Why don't the women scholars have spouses?"

"Some of them do, I think. They're just not here."

"Where are they?"

"Could you move," he said irritably, "you're sitting on my groin."

"Fine," she said and climbed off.

The next morning she made her way down past the conical evergreens of the terraced hill—so like the grounds of a palace, the palace of a moody princess named Sophia or Giovanna—ten minutes down the winding path to the locked gate to the village. It had rained in the night, and snails, golden and mauve, decorated the stone steps, sometimes dead center, causing Adrienne an occasional quick turn of the ankle. A dance step, she thought. Modern and bent-kneed. Very Martha Graham. *Don't kill us. We'll kill you.* At the top of the final stairs to the gate she pressed the buzzer that opened it

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electronically, and then dashed down to get out in time. YOU HAVE THIRTY SECONDS, said the sign. TRENTA MINUTI SECONDI USCIRE. PRESTO! One needed a key to get back in from the village, and she clutched it like a charm.

She had to follow the Via San Carlo to Corso Magenta, past a hazlenut gelato shop and a bakery with wreaths of braided bread and muffins cut like birds. She pressed herself up against the buildings to let the cars pass. She looked at her card. The masseuse was above a *farmacia,* she'd been told, and she saw it now, a little sign that said, MASSAGGIO DELLA VITA. She pushed on the outer door and went up.

Upstairs through an open doorway, she entered a room lined with books: books on vegetarianism, books on healing, books on juice. A cockatiel, white with a red dot like a Hindu wife's, was perched atop a picture frame. The picture was of Lake Como or Garda, though when you blinked it could also be a skull, a fissure through the center like a reef.

"Adrienne," said a smiling woman in a purple peasant dress. She had big, frosted hair and a wide, happy face that contained many shades of pink. She stepped forward and shook Adrienne's hand. "I'm Ilke."

"Yes," said Adrienne.

The cockatiel suddenly flew from its perch to land on Ilke's shoulder. It pecked at her big hair, then stared at Adrienne, accusingly.

Ilke's eyes moved quickly between Adrienne's own, a quick read, a radar scan. She then looked at her watch. "You can go into the back room now, and I'll be with you shortly. You can take off all your clothes, also any jewelry—watches, or rings. But if you want you can leave your underwear on. Whatever you prefer."

"What do most people do?" Adrienne swallowed in a difficult, conspicuous way.

Ilke smiled. "Some do it one way; some the other."

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"All right," Adrienne said and clutched her pocketbook. She stared at the cockatiel. "I just wouldn't want to rock the boat."

She stepped carefully toward the back room Ilke had indicated, and pushed past the heavy curtain. Inside was a large alcove, windowless and dark, with one small bluish light coming from the corner. In the center was a table with a newly creased flannel sheet. Speakers were built into the bottom of the table, and out of them came the sound of eery choral music, wordless *oohs* and *aahs* in minor tones, with a percussive sibilant chant beneath it that sounded to Adrienne like, "Jesus is best, Jesus is best," though perhaps it was "Cheese, I suspect." Overhead hung a mobile of white stars, crescent moons and doves. On the blue walls were more clouds and snowflakes. It was a child's room, a baby's room, everything trying hard to be harmless and sweet.

Adrienne removed all her clothes, her earrings, her watch, her rings. She had already grown used to the ring Martin had given her, and so it saddened and exhilerated her to take it off, a quick glimpse into the landscape of adultery. Her other ring was a smokey quartz, which a palm reader in Milwaukee—a man dressed like a gym teacher and set up at a card table in a German restaurant—had told her to buy and wear on her right index finger for power.

"What kind of power?" she had asked.

"The kind that's real," he said. "What you've got here," he said, waving around her left hand, pointing at the thin silver and turquoise she was wearing, "is squat."

"I like a palm reader who dresses you," she said later to Martin in the car on their way home. This was before the incident at the Spearson picnic, and things seemed not impossible then; she had wanted Martin to fall in love with her. "A guy who looks like Mike Ditka, but who picks out jewelry for you."

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"A guy who tells you you're sensitive, and that you will soon receive cash from someone wearing glasses. Where does he come up with this stuff?"

"You don't think I'm sensitive."

"I mean the money and glasses thing," he said. "And that gloomy bit about how they'll think you're a goner, but you're going to come through and live to see the world go through a radical physical change."

"That was gloomy," she agreed. There was a lot of silence and looking at the night-lit highway lines, the fireflies hitting the windshield and smearing, all phosphorescent gold, as if the car were flying through stars. "It must be hard," she said, "for someone like you to go out on a date with someone like me."

"Why do you say that?" he'd asked.

She climbed up on the table, stripped of ornament and the power of ornament, and slipped between the flannel sheets. For a second she felt numb and scared, naked in a strange room, more naked even than in a doctor's office, where you kept your jewelry on, like an odalisque. But it felt new to do this, to lead the body to this, the body with its dog's obedience, its dog's desire to please. She lay there waiting, watching the mobile moons turn slowly, half-revolutions, while from the speakers beneath the table came a new sound, an electronic, synthesized version of Brahms's lullaby. An infant. She was to become an infant again. Perhaps she would become the Spearsons' boy. He had been a beautiful baby.

Ilke came in quietly and appeared so suddenly behind Adrienne's head, it gave her a start.

"Move back toward me," whispered Ilke, "move back toward me," and Adrienne shifted until she could feel the crown of her head grazing Ilke's belly. The cockatiel whooshed in and perched on a nearby chair.

"Are you a little tense?" she said. She pressed both her thumbs at the center of Adrienne's forehead. Ilke's hands were strong, small, bony. Leathered claws. The harder she pressed the better it felt to Adrienne, all of her

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difficult thoughts unknotting and traveling out, up into Ilke's thumbs.

"Breathe deeply," said Ilke. "You cannot breathe deeply without it relaxing you."

Adrienne pushed her stomach in and out.

"You are from the Villa Hirschborn, aren't you?" Ilke's voice was a knowing smile.

"Ehuh."

"I thought so," said Ilke. "People are very tense up there. Rigid as boards." Ilke's hands moved down off Adrienne's forehead, along her eyebrows to her cheeks, which she squeezed repeatedly, in little circles, as if to break the weaker capillaries. She took hold of Adrienne's head and pulled. There was a dull, cracking sound. Then she pressed her knuckles along Adrienne's neck. "Do you know why?"

Adrienne grunted.

"It is because they are over educated and can no longer converse with their own mothers. It makes them a little crazy. They have literally lost their mother tongue. So they come to me. I am their mother, and they don't have to speak at all."

"Of course they *pay* you."

"Of course."

Adrienne suddenly fell into a long falling—of pleasure, of surrender, of glazed-eyed dying, a piece of heat set free in a room. Ilke rubbed Adrienne's earlobes, knuckled her scalp like a hairdresser, pulled at her neck and fingers and arms, as if they were jammed things. Adrienne would become a baby, join all the babies, in heaven where they lived.

Ilke began to massage sandalwood oil into Adrienne's arms, pressing down, polishing, ironing, looking, at a quick glimpse, like one of Degas's laundresses. Adrienne shut her eyes again and listened to the music, which had switched from synthetic lullabyes to the contrapuntal sounds of a flute and a thunderstorm. With these hands upon her, she felt a little forgiven and began to think

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generally of forgiveness, how much of it was required in life: to forgive everyone, yourself, the people you loved, and then wait to be forgiven by them. Where was all this forgiveness supposed to come from? Where was this great inexhaustible supply?

"Where are you?" whispered Ilke. "You are somewhere very far."

Adrienne wasn't sure. Where was she? In her own head, like a dream; in the bellows of her lungs. What was she? Perhaps a child. Perhaps a corpse. Perhaps a fern in the forest in the storm; a singing bird. The sheets were folded back. The hands were all over her now. Perhaps she was under the table with the music, or in a musty corner of her own hip. She felt Ilke rub oil into her chest, between her breasts, out along the ribs, and circularly on the abdomen. "There is something stuck here," Ilke said. "Something not working." Then she pulled the covers back up. "Are you cold?" she asked, and though Adrienne didn't answer, Ilke brought another blanket, mysteriously heated, and laid it across Adrienne. "There," said Ilke. She lifted the blanket so that only her feet were exposed. She rubbed oil into her soles, the toes, something squeezed out of Adrienne, like an olive. She felt as if she would cry. She felt like the baby Jesus. The grown Jesus. *The poor will always be with us.* The dead Jesus. Cheese is the best. Cheese is the best.

At her desk in the outer room, Ilke wanted money. Thirty-five thousand lire. "I can give it to you for thirty thousand, if you decide to come on a regular basis. Would you like to come on a regular basis?" asked Ilke.

Adrienne was fumbling with her wallet. She sat down in the wicker rocker near the desk. "Yes," she said. "Of course."

Ilke had put on reading glasses and now opened up her appointment book to survey the upcoming weeks. She flipped a page, then flipped it back. She looked out over

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her glasses at Adrienne. "How often would you like to come?"

"Every day," said Adrienne.

"Every day?"

Ilke's hoot worried Adrienne. "Every *other* day?" Adrienne peeped hopefully. Perhaps the massage had bewitched her, ruined her. Perhaps she had fallen in love.

Ilke looked back at her book and shrugged. "Every other day," she repeated slowly as a way of holding the conversation still while she checked her schedule. "How about at two o'clock?"

"Monday, Wednesday and Friday?"

"Perhaps we can occasionally arrange a Saturday."

"Okay. Fine." Adrienne placed the money on the desk and stood up. Ilke walked her to the door and thrust her hand out formally. Her face had changed from its earlier pinks to a strange and shiny orange.

"Thank you," said Adrienne. She shook Ilke's hand, but then leaned forward and kissed her cheek; she would kiss the business out of this. "Good-bye," she said. She stepped gingerly down the stairs; she had not entirely returned to her body yet. She had to go slow. She felt a little like she had just seen God, but also a little like she had just seen a hooker. Outside she walked carefully back toward the villa, but first stopped at the gelato shop for a small dish of hazlenut ice cream. It was smooth, toasty, buttery, like a beautiful liqueur, and she thought how different it was from America, where so much of the ice cream now looked like babies had attacked it with their cookies.

"Well, Martin, it's been nice knowing you," Adrienne said smiling. She reached out to shake his hand with one of hers and pat him on the back with the other. "You've been a good sport. I hope there will be no hard feelings."

"You've just come back from your massage," he said a little numbly. "How was it?"

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"As you would say, 'Relaxing.' As I would say—well, I wouldn't say."

Martin led her to the bed. "Kiss and tell," he said.

"I'll just kiss," she said, kissing.

"I'll settle," he said. But then she stopped and went into the bathroom to shower for dinner.

At dinner there was *zuppa alla paesana* and then *salsicce alla griglia con spinaci.* For the first time since they'd arrived, she was seated near Martin, who was catercorner to her left. He was seated next to another economist and was speaking heatedly with him about a book on labor division and economic policy. "But Wilkander ripped that theory off from Boyer!" Martin let his spoon splash violently into his *zuppa* before a waiter came and removed the bowl.

"Let us just say," said the other man calmly, "that it was a sort of homage."

"If that's 'homage,' " said Martin, fidgeting with his fork, "I'd like to do a little 'homage' on the Chase Manhattan Bank."

"I think it was felt that there was sufficient looseness there to warrant further explication."

"Right. And one's twin sibling is simply an explication of the text."

"Why not," smiled the other economist, who was calm, probably a supply-sider.

Poor Martin, thought Adrienne. Poor Keynesian Martin, poor Marxist Martin, perspiring and red. "Left of Lenin?!" she had heard him exclaiming the other day to an agriculturalist. "Left of *Lenin?!* Left of the Lennon Sisters, you mean!" Poor godless, raised-an-atheist-in-Ohio Martin. "On Christmas," he'd said to her once, "we used to go down to The Science Store and worship the Bunsen burners."

She would have to find just the right blouse, just the right perfume, greet him on the chaise lounge with a bare shoulder and a purring, "Hello, Mister Man." Take him down by the lake near the Sfondrata chapel and get him

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laid. Hire somebody. She turned to the scholar next to her, who had just arrived this morning.

"Did you have a good flight?" she asked. Her own small talk at dinner no longer shamed her.

"Flight is the word," he said. "I needed to flee my department, my bills, my ailing car. Come to a place that would take care of me."

"This is it, I guess. Though they won't fix your car. Won't even discuss it, I've found."

"I'm on a Guggenheim," he said.

"How nice!" She thought of the museum in New York, and of a pair of earrings she had bought in the gift shop there but had never worn because they always looked broken, even though that was the way they were supposed to look.

". . . but I neglected to ask the foundation for enough money. I didn't realize what you could ask for. I didn't ask for the same amount everyone else did, and so I received substantially less."

Adrienne was sympathetic. "So instead of a regular Guggenheim, you got a little Guggenheim."

"Yes," he said.

"A Guggenheimy," she said.

He smiled in a troubled sort of way. "Right."

"So now you have to live in Guggenheimy town."

He stopped pushing at a sausage with his fork. "Yes. I heard there would be wit here."

She tried to make her lips curl, like his.

"Sorry," he said. "I was just kidding."

"Jet lag," she said.

"Yes."

"Jetty laggy." She smiled at him. "Baby talk. We love it." She paused. "Last week of course we weren't like this. You've arrived a little late."

He was a beautiful baby. In the dark there was thumping, like tom-toms, and a piccolo high above it. She couldn't look, because when she looked, it shocked her, another woman's hands all over her. She just kept her

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eyes closed, and concentrated on surrender, on the restful invalidity of it. Sometimes she concentrated on being where Ilke's hands were—at her feet, at the small of her back.

"Your parents are no longer living, are they?" Ilke said in the dark.

"No."

"Did they die young?"

"Medium. They died medium. I was a menopausal, afterthought child."

"Do you want to know what I feel in you?"

"All right."

"I feel a great and deep gentleness. But I also feel that you have been dishonored."

"Dishonored?" So Japanese. Adrienne liked the sound of it.

"Yes. You have a deeply held fear. Right here." Ilke's hand went just under Adrienne's ribcage.

Adrienne breathed deeply, in and out. "I killed a baby," she whispered.

"Yes, we have all killed a baby—there is a baby in all of us. That is why people come to me, to be reunited with it."

"No, I've killed a real one."

Ilke was very quiet and then she said, "You can do the side-lying now. You can put this pillow under your head; this other one between your knees." Adrienne rolled awkwardly onto her side. Finally Ilke said, "This country, its pope, its church, makes murderers of women. You must not let it do that to you. Move back toward me. That's it."

That's not *it,* thought Adrienne, in this temporary dissolve, seeing death and birth, seeing the beginning and then the end, how they were the same quiet black, same nothing ever after: everyone's life appeared in the world like a movie in a room. First dark, then light, then dark again. But it was all staggered so that somewhere there was always light.

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That's not it. That's not it, she thought. But thank you.

When Adrienne left that afternoon, seeking sugar in one of the shops, she moved slowly, blinded by the angle of the afternoon light but also believing she saw Martin coming toward her in the narrow street, approaching like the lumbering logger he sometimes seemed to be. Her squinted gaze, however, failed to catch his, and he veered suddenly left into a *calle.* By the time she reached the corner, he had disappeared entirely. How strange, she thought. She had felt close to something, to him, and then suddenly not. She climbed the path back up toward the villa and went and knocked on the door of his studio, but he wasn't there.

"You smell good," she greeted Martin. It was some time later and she had just returned to the room to find him there. "Did you just take a bath?"

"A little while ago," he said.

She curled up to him, teasingly. "Not a shower? A bath? Did you put some scented bath salts in it?"

"I took a very masculine bath," said Martin.

She sniffed him again. "What scent did you use?"

"A manly scent," he said. "Rock. I took a rock-scented bath."

"Did you take a bubble bath?" She cocked her head to one side.

He smiled. "Yes, but I, uh, made my own bubbles."

"You did?" She squeezed his biceps.

"Yeah. I hammered the water with my fist."

She walked over to the cassette player and put a cassette in. She looked over at Martin, who looked suddenly unhappy. "This music annoys you, doesn't it?"

Martin squirmed. "It's just—why can't he sing any one song all the way through?"

She thought about this. "Because he's Mr. Medley-head?"

"You didn't bring anything else?"

"No."

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She went back and sat next to Martin, in silence, smelling the scent of him, as if it were odd.

For dinner there was *vitello alla salvia,* baby peas and a pasta made with caviar. "Nipping it in the bud," sighed Adrienne. "An early frost." A fat, elderly man arriving late pulled his chair out onto her foot, then sat down on it. She shrieked.

"Oh, dear, I'm sorry," said the man, lifting himself up as best he could.

"It's okay," said Adrienne. "I'm sure it's okay."

But the next morning, at exercises, Adrienne studied it closely during the leg lifts. The big toe was swollen and blue, and the nail had been loosened and set back at an odd and unhinged angle. "You're going to lose your toenail," said Kate.

"Great," said Adrienne.

"That happened to me once, during my first marriage. My husband dropped a dictionary on my foot. One of those subconscious things."

"You were married before?"

"Oh, yes," she sighed. "I had one of those rehearsal marriages, you know, where you're a feminist and train a guy, and then some *other* feminist comes along and *gets* the guy."

"I don't know." Adrienne scowled. "I think there's something wrong with the words *feminist* and *gets the guy* being in the same sentence."

"Yes, well—"

"Were you upset?"

"Of course. But then, I'd been doing everything. I'd insisted on separate finances, on being totally self-supporting. I was working. I was doing the child care. I paid for the house, I cooked it, I cleaned it. I found myself shouting, "This is feminism? Thank you, Betty!"

"But now you're with someone else."

"Pre-taught. Self-cleaning. Batteries included."

"Someone else trained him, and you stole him."

Kate smiled. "Of course. What, am I crazy?"

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"What happened to the toe?"

"The nail came off. And the one that grew back was wavy and dark and used to scare the children."

"Oh," said Adrienne.

"Why would someone publish six books on Chaucer?" Adrienne was watching Martin dress. She was also smoking a cigarette. One of the strange things about the villa was that the smokers had all quit smoking, and the nonsmokers had taken it up. People were getting in touch with their alternative centers. Bequeathed cigarettes abounded. Cartons were appearing outside people's doors.

"You have to understand academic publishing," said Martin. "No one reads these books. Everyone just agrees to publish everyone else's. It's one big circle jerk. It's a giant economic agreement. When you think about it, it probably violates the Sherman Act."

"A circle jerk?" she said uncertainly. The cigarette was making her dizzy.

"Yeah," said Martin, re-knotting his tie.

"But six books on Chaucer? Why not, say, a Cat Stevens book?"

"Don't look at me," he said. "I'm in the circle."

She sighed. "Then I shall sing to you. Mood music." She made up a romantic, Asian-sounding tune and danced around the room with her cigarette, in a floating, wing-limbed way. "This is my Hopi dance," she said. "So full of hope."

Then it was time to go to dinner.

The cockatiel now seemed used to Adrienne and would whistle twice, then fly into the back room, perch quickly on the picture frame and wait with her for Ilke. Adrienne closed her eyes and breathed deeply, the flannel sheet pulled up under her arms, tightly, like a sarong.

Ilke's face appeared overhead in the dark, as if she were a mother just checking, peering into a crib. "How are you today?"

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Adrienne opened her eyes to see that Ilke was wearing a pin that said: Say a Prayer. Pet a Rock.

Say a Prayer. "Good," said Adrienne. "I'm good." Pet a Rock.

Ilke ran her fingers through Adrienne's hair, humming faintly.

"What is this music today?" Adrienne asked. Like Martin, she too had grown weary of the Mandy Patinkin tapes, all that unshackled exuberance.

"Crickets and elk," Ilke whispered.

"Crickets and elk."

"Crickets and elk and a little harp."

Ilke began to move around the table, pulling on Adrienne's limbs and pressing deep into her tendons. "I'm doing choreographed massage today," Ilke said. "That's why I'm wearing this dress."

Adrienne hadn't noticed the dress. Instead, with the lights now low, except for the illuminated clouds on the side wall, she felt herself sinking into the pools of death deep in her bones, the dark wells of loneliness, failure, blame. "You may turn over now," she heard Ilke say. And she struggled a little in the flannel sheets to do so, twisting in them, until Ilke helped her, as if she were a nurse and Adrienne someone old and sick—a stroke victim, that's what it was. She had become a stroke victim. Then lowering her face into the toweled cheek plates the brace on the table offered up to her (the cradle, Ilke called it), Adrienne began quietly to cry, the deep touching of her body, melting her down to some equation of animal sadness, shoe leather and brine. She began to understand why people would want to live in these dusky nether zones, the meltdown brought on by sleep or drink or this. It seemed truer, more familiar to the soul than was the busy complicated flash that was normal life. Ilke's arms leaned into her, her breasts brushing softly against Adrienne's head, which now felt connected to the rest of her only by filaments and strands. The body suddenly seemed a tumor on the brain, a mere means of convey-

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ance, a wagon; the mind's go-cart taken apart, laid in pieces on this table. "You have a knot here in your trapezius," Ilke said, kneading Adrienne's shoulder. "I can feel the belly of the knot right here," she said, pressing hard, bruising her shoulder a little, and then easing up. "Let go," she said. "Let go all the way, of everything."

"I might die," said Adrienne. Something surged in the music and she missed what Ilke said in reply, though it sounded a little like, "Changes are good." Though perhaps it was "Chances aren't good." Ilke pulled Adrienne's toes, milking even the injured one, with its loose nail and leaky underskin, and then she left Adrienne there in the dark, in the music, though Adrienne felt it was she who was leaving, like a person dying, like a train pulling away. She felt the rage loosened from her back, floating aimlessly around in her, the rage that did not know at what or whom to rage though it continued to rage.

She awoke to Ilke's rocking her gently. "Adrienne, get up. I have another client soon."

"I must have fallen asleep," said Adrienne. "I'm sorry."

She got up slowly, got dressed, and went out into the outer room; the cockatiel whooshed out with her, grazing her head.

"I feel like I've just been strafed," she said, clutching her hair.

Ilke frowned.

"Your bird. I mean, by your bird. In there—" she pointed back toward the massage room—"*that* was great." She reached into her purse to pay. Ilke had moved the wicker chair to the other side of the room so that there was no longer any place to sit down or linger. "You want lire or dollars?" she asked and was a little taken aback when Ilke said rather firmly, "I'd prefer lire."

Ilke was bored with her. That was it. Adrienne was having a religious experience, but Ilke—Ilke was just

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being social. Adrienne held out the money and Ilke plucked it from her hand, then opened the outside door and leaned to give Adrienne the rushed bum's kiss—left, right—and then closed the door behind her.

Adrienne was in a fog, her legs noodly, her eyes unaccustomed to the light. Outside, in front of the *farmacia,* if she wasn't careful, she was going to get hit by a car. How could Ilke just send people out into the busy street like that, ducks for the kill, fatted calves, a farewell to arms? Her body felt doughy, muddy. This was good, she supposed. Decomposition. She stepped slowly, carefully, her Martha Graham step, along the narrow walk between the street and the stores. And when she turned the corner to head back up toward the path to the Villa Hirschborn, there stood Martin, her husband, rounding a corner and heading her way.

"Hi!" she said, so pleased suddenly to meet him like this, away from what she now referred to as "the compound." "Are you going to the *farmacia?*" she asked.

"Uh, yes," said Martin. He leaned to kiss her cheek.

"Want some company?"

He looked a little blank, as if he needed to be alone. Perhaps he was going to buy condoms.

"Oh, never mind," she said gaily. "I'll see you later, up at the compound, before dinner."

"Great," he said, and took her hand, took two steps away, and then let her hand go, gently, midair.

She walked away, toward a small park—il Giardino Leonardo—out past the station for the vaporetti. Near a particularly exuberant rhododendron sat a short, dark woman with a bright turquoise bandanna knotted around her neck. She had set up a table with a sign: CHIROMANTE: TAROT E FACCIA. Adrienne sat down opposite her in the empty chair. "Americano," she said.

"I do faces, palms or cards," the woman with the blue scarf said.

Adrienne looked at her own hands. She didn't want to have her face read. She lived like that already. It happened all the time at the villa, people trying to read your

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face—freezing your brain with stoney looks and remarks made malicious with obscurity, so that you couldn't read *their* faces, while they were busy reading yours. It all made her feel creepy, like a lonely head on a poster somewhere.

"The cards are the best," said the woman. "Ten thousand lire."

"Okay," said Adrienne. She was still looking at the netting of her open hands, the dried riverbed of life just sitting there. "The cards."

The woman swept up the cards, and dealt half of them out, every which way in a kind of swastika. Then without glancing at them, she leaned forward boldly and said to Adrienne, "You are sexually unsatisfied. Am I right?"

"Is that what the cards say?"

"In a general way. You have to take the whole deck and interpret."

"What does this card say?" asked Adrienne, pointing to one with some naked corpses leaping from coffins.

"Any one card doesn't say anything. It's the whole feeling of them." She quickly dealt out the remainder of the deck on top of the other cards. "You are looking for a guide, some kind of guide, because the man you are with does not make you happy. Am I right?"

"Maybe," said Adrienne, who was already reaching for her purse to pay the ten thousand lire so that she could leave.

"I am right," said the woman, taking the money and handing Adrienne a small, smudged business card. "Stop by tomorrow. Come to my shop. I have a powder."

Adrienne wandered back out of the park, past a group of tourists climbing out of a bus, back toward the Villa Hirschborn—through the gate, which she opened with her key, and up the long stone staircase to the top of the promontory. Instead of going back to the villa, she headed out through the woods toward her studio, toward the dead tufts of spiders she had memorialized in her grief. She decided to take a different path, not the one toward the studio, but one that led farther up the hill, a

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steeper grade, toward an open meadow at the top, with a small Roman ruin at its edge—a corner of the hill's original fortress still stood there. But in the middle of the meadow, something came over her—a balmy wind, or the heat from the uphill hike, and she took off all her clothes, lay down in the grass and stared around at the dusky sky. To either side of her the spokes of tree branches crisscrossed upward in a kind of cat's cradle. More directly overhead she studied the silver speck of a jet, the metallic head of its white stream like the tip of a thermometer. There were a hundred people inside this head of a pin, thought Adrienne. Or was it, perhaps, just the head of a pin? When was something truly small, and when was it a matter of distance? The branches of the trees seemed to encroach inward and rotate a little to the left, a little to the right, like something mechanical, and as she began to drift off, she saw the beautiful Spearson baby, cooing in a clown hat, she saw Martin furiously swimming in a pool, she saw the strewn beads of her own fertility, all the eggs within her, leap away like a box of tapioca off a cliff. It seemed to her that everything she had ever needed to know in her life she had known at one time or another, but she just hadn't known all those things at once, at the same time, at a single moment. They were scattered through, and she had had to leave and forget one in order to get to another. A shadow fell across her, inside her, and she could feel herself retreat to that place in her bones where death was and you greeted it like an acquaintance in a room; you said hello and were then ready for whatever was next—which might be a guide, the guide that might be sent to you, the guide to lead you back out into your life again.

Someone was shaking her gently. She flickered slightly awake to see the pale, ethereal face of a strange older woman leaning over, peering down at her as if Adrienne were something odd in the bottom of a tea cup. The woman was dressed all in white—white shorts, white cardigan, white scarf around her head. The guide.

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"Are you—the guide?" whispered Adrienne.

"Yes, my dear," the woman said in a faintly English voice that sounded like the good witch of the north.

"You are?" Adrienne asked.

"Yes," said the woman. "And I've brought the group up here to view the old fort, but I was a little worried that you might not like all of us traipsing past here while you were, well—are you all right?"

Adrienne was more awake now and sat up to see at the end of the meadow the group of tourists she'd previously seen below in the town, getting off the bus.

"Yes, thank you," mumbled Adrienne. She lay back down to think about this, hiding herself in the walls of grass, like a child hoping to trick the facts. "Oh, my god," she finally said, and groped about to her left to find her clothes and clutch them, panicked, to her belly. She breathed deeply, then put them on, lying as flat to the ground as she could, hard to glimpse, a snake getting back inside its skin, a change, perhaps, of reptilian heart. Then she stood, zipped her pants, secured her belt buckle and, squaring her shoulders, walked bravely past the bus and the tourists who, though they tried not to stare at her, did stare.

By this time everyone in the villa was privately doing imitations of everyone else. "Martin, you should announce who you're doing before you do it," said Adrienne, dressing for dinner. "I can't really tell."

"Cube-steak yuppies!" Martin ranted at the ceiling. "Legends in their own mind! Rumors in their own room!"

"Yourself. You're doing yourself." She straightened his collar and tried to be wifely.

For dinner there was *cioppino* and *insalata mista* and *pesce con pignoli,* a thin piece of fish like a leaf. From everywhere around the dining room scraps of dialogue—rhetorical barbed wire, indignant and arcane—floated over toward her: "As an aesthetician, you can't not be

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interested in the sublime!" or "Why, that's the most facile thing I've ever heard!" or "Good grief, tell him about the Peasants' Revolt, would you?" But no one spoke to her directly. She had no subject, not really, not one she liked, except perhaps movies and movie stars. Martin was at a far table, his back toward her, listening to the monk man. At times like these, she thought, it was probably a good idea to carry a small hand puppet.

She made her fingers flap in her lap.

Finally, one of the people next to her turned and introduced himself. His face was poppy-seeded with whiskers, and he seemed to be looking down, watching his own mouth move. When she asked him how he liked it here so far, she received a fairly brief history of the Ottoman Empire. She nodded and smiled, and at the end he rubbed his dark beard, looked at her compassionately, and said, "We are not good advertisements for this life. Are we?"

"There *are* a lot of dingdongs here," she admitted. He looked a little hurt, so she added, "But I like that about a place. I do."

When after dinner she went for an evening walk with Martin, she tried to strike up a conversation about celebrities and movie stars. "I keep thinking about Princess Caroline's husband being killed," she said.

Martin was silent.

"That poor family," said Adrienne. "There's been so much tragedy."

Martin glared at her. "Yes," he said facetiously. "That poor, cursed family. I keep thinking, what can I do to help? What can I do? And I think, and I think, and I think so much I'm helpless. I throw up my hands and end up doing nothing. I'm helpless!" He began to walk faster, ahead of her, down into the village. Adrienne began to run to keep up. Marriage, she thought, it's an institution, all right.

Near the main piazza, under a streetlamp, the CHIROMANTE: TAROT E FACCIA had set up her table again.

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When she saw Adrienne, she called out, "Give me your birthday, signora, and your husband's birthday, and I will do your charts to tell you whether the two of you are compatible! Or—" She paused to study Martin skeptically as he rushed past. "Or, I can just tell you right now."

"Have you been to this woman before?" he asked, slowing down. Adrienne grabbed Martin's arm and started to lead him away.

"I needed a change of scenery."

Now he stopped. "Well," he said sympathetically, calmer after some exercise, "who could blame you." Adrienne took his hand, feeling a grateful, marital love—alone, in Italy, at night, in May. Was there any love that wasn't at bottom a grateful one? The moonlight glittered off the lake like electric fish, like a school of ice.

"What are you doing?" Adrienne asked Ilke the next afternoon. The lamps were particularly low, though there was a spotlight directed onto a picture of Ilke's mother, which she had placed on an end table, for the month, in honor of Mother's Day. The mother looked ghostly, like a sacrifice. What if Ilke were truly a witch? What if fluids and hairs and nails were being collected as offerings in memory of her mother?

"I'm fluffing your aura," she said. "It is very dark today, burned down to a shadowy rim." She was manipulating Adrienne's toes and Adrienne suddenly had a horror-movie vision of Ilke with jars of collected toe juice in a closet for Satan, who, it would be revealed, *was* Ilke's mother. Perhaps Ilke would lean over suddenly and bite Adrienne's shoulder, drink her blood. How could Adrienne control these thoughts? She felt her aura fluff like the fur of a screeching cat. She imagined herself, for the first time, never coming here again. Good-bye. Farewell. It would be a brief affair, a little nothing; a chat on the porch at a party.

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Fortunately, there were other things to keep Adrienne busy.

She had begun spray-painting the spiders and the results were interesting. She could see herself explaining to a dealer back home that the work represented the spider web of solitude—a vibration at the periphery reverberates inward (experiential, deafening) and the spider rushes out from the center to devour the gong, the gonger and the gong. Gone. She could see the dealer taking her phone number and writing it down on an extremely loose scrap of paper.

And there was the occasional after-dinner sing-song, scholars and spouses gathered around the piano in various states of inebriation and forgetfulness. "Okay, that may be how you learned it, Harold, but that's *not* how it goes."

There was also the Asparagus Festival, which, at Carlo's suggestion, she and Kate Spalding in one of her T-shirts—*all right already with the T-shirts, Kate*—decided to attend. They took a hydrofoil across the lake and climbed a steep road up toward a church square. The road was long and tiring and Adrienne began to refer to it as the Asparagus Death Walk.

"Maybe there isn't really a festival," she suggested, gasping for breath, but Kate kept walking, ahead of her.

Adrienne sighed. Off in the trees were the ratchety cheeping of birds and the competing, hourly chimes of two churches, followed later by the single off-tone of the half hour. When she and Kate finally reached the asparagus festival, it turned out to be only a little ceremony where a few people bid very high prices for clutches of asparagus described as "bello, bello," the proceeds from which went to the local church.

"I used to grow asparagus," said Kate on their walk back down. They were taking a different route this time, and the lake and its ochre villages spread out before them, peaceful and far away. Along the road wildflowers grew in a pallet of pastels, like soaps.

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"I could never grow asparagus," said Adrienne. As a child her favorite food had been "asparagus with holiday sauce." "I did grow a carrot once, though. But it was so small I just put it in a scrapbook."

"Are you still seeing Ilke?"

"This week, at any rate. How about you?"

"She's booked solid. I couldn't get another appointment. All the scholars, you know, are paying her regular visits."

"Really?"

"Oh, yes," said Kate very knowingly. "They're tense as dimes." Already Adrienne could smell the fumes of the Fiats and the ferries and delivery vans, the asparagus festival far away.

"Tense as dimes?"

Back at the villa, Adrienne waited for Martin, and when he came in, smelling of sandalwood, all the little deaths in her bones told her this: he was seeing the masseuse.

She sniffed the sweet parabola of his neck and stepped back. "I want to know how long have you've been getting massages. Don't lie to me," she said slowly, her voice hard as a spike. Anxiety shrank his face: his mouth caved in, his eyes grew beady and scared.

"What makes you think I've been getting—" he started to say. "Well, just once or twice."

She leaped away from him and began pacing furiously about the room, touching the furniture, not looking at him. "How could you?" she asked. "You know what my going there has meant to me! How could you not tell me?" She picked up a book on the dressing table—*Industrial Relations Systems*—and slammed it back down. "How could you horn in on this experience? How could you be so furtive and untruthful?"

"I am terribly sorry," he said.

"Yeah, well, so am I," said Adrienne. "And when we get home, I want a divorce." She could see it now, the empty apartment, the bad eggplant parmigiana, all the

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Halloweens she would answer the doorbell, a boozy divorcee frightening the little children with too much enthusiasm for their costumes. "I feel so fucking *dishonored!*" Nothing around her seemed able to hold steady; nothing held.

Martin was silent and she was silent and then he began to speak, in a beseeching way, there it was the beseech again, rumbling at the edge of her life like a truck. "We are both so lonely here," he said. "But I have only been waiting for you. That is all I have done for the last eight months. To try not to let things intrude, to let you take your time, to make sure you ate something, to buy the goddamn Spearsons a new picnic bench, to bring you to a place where anything at all might happen, where you might even leave me, but at least come back into life at last—"

"You did?"

"Did what?"

"You bought the Spearsons a new *picnic bench?*"

"Yes, I did."

She thought about this. "Didn't they think you were being hostile?"

"Oh . . . I think, yes, they probably thought it was hostile."

And the more Adrienne thought about it, about the poor bereaved Spearsons, and about Martin and all the ways he tried to show her he was on her side, whatever that meant, how it was both the hope and shame of him that he was always doing his best, the more she felt foolish, deprived of reasons. Her rage flapped awkwardly away like a duck. She felt as she had when her cold, fierce parents had at last grown sick and old, stick boned and saggy, protected by infirmity the way cuteness protected a baby, or should, it should protect a baby, and she had been left with her rage—vestigial girlhood rage—inappropriate and intact. She would hug her parents good-bye, the gentle, emptied sacks of them, and think, where did you go?

Time, Adrienne thought. What a racket.

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Martin had suddenly begun to cry. He sat at the bed's edge and curled inward, his soft, furry face in his great hard hands, his head falling downward into the bright plaid of his shirt.

She felt dizzy and turned away, toward the window. A fog had drifted in, and in the evening light the sky and the lake seemed a singular blue, like a Monet. "I've never seen you cry," she said.

"Well, I cry," he said. "I can even cry at the sports page if the games are too close. Look at me, Adrienne. You never really look at me."

But she could only continue to stare out the window, touching her fingers to the shutters and frame. She felt far away, as if she were back home, walking through the neighborhood at dinnertime: when the cats sounded like babies and the babies sounded like birds, and the fathers were home from work, their children in their arms gumming the language, air shaping their flowery throats into a park of singing. Through the windows wafted the smell of cooking food.

"We are with each other now," Martin was saying. "And in the different ways it means, we must try to make a life."

Out over the Sfondrata chapel tower, where the fog had broken, she thought she saw a single star, like the distant nose of a jet; there were people in the clayey clouds. She turned, and for a moment it seemed they were all there in Martin's eyes, all the absolving dead in residence in his face, the angel of the dead baby shining like a blazing creature, and she went to him, to protect and encircle him, seeking the heart's best trick, *oh, terrific heart.* "Please, forgive me," she said.

And he whispered, "Of course. It is the only thing. Of course."

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Patricia Smith

Always in the Head

"I seen it lots of times, I seen it, just from being on the street when something was going down, I seen kids get killed, a few, my buddy Jules got bucked, this gang he was down with, I mean he wasn't even down with them when they started beefin with this other gang, but one day, it was hot, I remember it was real hot, somebody called Jules and he opened the window and looked out and they got him in the head, you know all the time now you got to get em in the head, don't shoot em in the head most likely they won't die, and if they don't die you might as well kill yourself cause soon as they on their feet they be gunning for you, might as well blow your ownself away. But you know what was funny, even the folks Jules was down with didn't know who smoked him cause they was beefin with so many other gangs, and then there was Billy, they jacked him up big time, blew him up just for talkin shit, acting like he was down with the boys from Blue Hill, cocking them colors wrong, and I'm sorry for laughing, I know it ain't funny, but I was still expecting to see my boys hanging in the hood, jiving and scoping the bitches, but then I saw them at the wake, lying stiff, skin two colors too light, wearing wigs to hold their heads on and their mamas clawing at them and screaming out they heads for Jesus, then I knew Jules and Billy wouldn't be hanging no more, but after a while you just deal with dying, you get cold with it, it's like 'Yo man, somebody got their cap peeled last night, you know who it was? Man, not him man, that's foul, he was down man, you going to the wake? No man, can't make it, got a game, gotta kick

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some ass on the court.' You just take in the word,
you know, about somebody dying and you deal with
it, can't let it twist you round and mess your head up
cause then you let your guard down and like I said
before might as well kill yourself. Me? I ain't worried
about dying. I wear the right colors, got my brim
twisted proper. Sometimes its even fun hanging out at
places most people are scared of, like down at Dudley
late at night, the game is not knowing if you gon be
there when something goes down and something
always does, somebody gets bucked and hits the street
and some people will say 'Oh man, that's too bad,'
but almost everyone else will say 'Did you see that
guy get shot, that was live man, did you see how he
ran, how he fell, how he screamed like a girl?
It was like the movies man.
He screamed like a fuckin girl.' "

Tuesday, wind shakes the windows.
No one is outside,
at least not that I can see, and my son pulls on
a second sweater, a bulky goosedown coat. He is 15,
a year younger than Jules, a year older
than the child who saw Jules open the window
to answer to his name, to let in some air.

There are times I hate being a reporter.
I am afraid of the stories.
The voices are too real, the colors too strong.
I rewind the tape, open another computer file,
hear my son yell good-bye
and slam the door on his way out.
I run to the window. Yes, his head is covered.

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David Bottoms

Hard Easter, Northwest Montana

Shadows from the spruce woods slouch down the hill,
the windmill's crippled shadow
pierces the house, a blue fog spirits
the trees and the full moon
floods the empty corral. Near the dark edge
of a scream, I hunch toward my Tensor,
working at the window
on taxes. The bleak numbers blur.

On the hillside the burro watches the moon.
How saintly she seemed this morning, half-blind
and motherly, bearing
her little cross,
leading the sheep to pasture,
and saintly now, frozen against the hill
by whatever weaves
the treeline, heard or felt.

A loose tarp flaps across the firewood
as wind creaks the deck,
and steadily the ridge shadows turn
under the moon,
the windmill's shadow follows toward the barn.
Such a picture of peace—
burro and sheep
grazing knapweed in the late snow.

Already they've forgotten the lamb's torn lung,
the purple knot of bowels
on stained rock,
while in the mountains beyond downed fences,
muscles stretch and shudder, sharp eyes
open underground.

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Nin Andrews

Red Blossoms

the uncanny ability, a special dance, a mind on safari,
the scent of blossoms, the foraging flight, the uncanny
ability, to cling, to find, to fly into a mind on safari,
the scent of blossoms, feet as small as eyelashes,
slipping in, a special dance, a sign language, circling
slowly, crawling deeper, feet as small as eyelashes,
into the tulip's center, a sign language, folding his
wings, combing the surface with his tongue, crawling
deeper into the tulip's center, spiraling down, folding
his wings, combing the surface, the sugary juice of
warm petals, wind rustling leaves and ladies' dresses,
spiraling down, pollen sticks to his skin, his hair, his
wings, the sugary juice of warm petals, rustling leaves
and ladies' dresses, clutching the inner parts of the
blossom, pollen sticks to legs, hair, wings, the
sweetness all over his fur, clutching the inner parts of
the blossom, drunk with nectar, heavy, the sweetness
all over his fur, the delirious silk of red blossoms,
drunk with nectar, heavy, lifting up the delirious silk
of red blossoms.

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Two Poems by Agnieszka Osiecka

According to Steinhaus

You're an eight-year-old
lying naked
on the floor of your grandfather's room,
you're not wearing any of the later uniforms:
not the navy blue gabardine pinafore
nor the US Army khakis
nor even that black sweater.
Everybody in turn enters and says:
get dressed,
choose something
or we'll choose it for you . . .
You fight back
repulse the attack
and hold out
The carpet is your battleship,
an aeroplane and a castle . . .
A beam of light falls in through the window
and stumbles over a book . . .
The dust from the book rises,
swirling in a thousand tiny worlds
Grandfather enters, smiles, counts and
  arranges worlds . . .
He wraps you in something warm!

•

In a moment
we will all fall into the lair
called the past.
But when we really grow up
we will clamber out with grandfather
supported by a beam of light

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and we will undress
and fly off together
to a meadow
full of silent marigolds,
our faces turned toward
the flowers.

Thank God for This Little Reverie

Those two beautiful Lvovians
my father and your mother
what would have happened
if they had met
He—der Klaviermeister—
would erupt into shimmy on his mad piano
and she'd illuminate
the keyboard with a violet look
and afterwards
so fast, so suddenly
the black 'n' white piano keys
would turn into a staircase
And up these pulsing joyous stairs
they would climb into bed
dancing and singing Gershwin tunes . . .
And afterwards
they'd live so happily,
so happily it's indecent.
And only we, WE would not be,
Or we would not be ourselves.

—translated from the Polish
by Michael Kott

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Two Poems by Stephen Dunn

The Vanishings

One day it will vanish,
how you felt when you were overwhelmed
by her, soaping each other in the shower,
or when you heard the news
of his death, there in the T-Bone diner
on Queens Boulevard amid the shouts
of short-order cooks, Armenian, oblivious.
One day one thing and then a dear other
will blur and though they won't be lost
they won't mean as much,
that motorcycle ride on the dirt road
to the deserted beach near Cadiz,
the Guardia mistaking you for a drug-runner,
his machine gun in your belly—
already history now, merely *your* history,
which means everything to you.
You strain to bring back
your mother's full face and full body
before her illness, the arc and tenor
of family dinners, the mysteries
of radio, and Charlie Collins,
eight years old, inviting you
to his house to see the largest turd
that had ever come from him, unflushed.
One day there'll be almost nothing
except what you've written down,
then only what you've written down well,
then little of that.
The march on Washington in '68
where you hoped to change the world
and meet beautiful, sensitive women

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is choreography now, cops on horses,
everyone backing off, stepping forward.
The exam you stole and put back unseen
has become one of your stories,
overtold, tainted with charm.
All of it, anyway, will go the way of icebergs
come summer, the small chunks floating
in the Adriatic until they're only water,
pure, and someone taking sad pride
that he can swim in it, numbly.
For you, though, loss, almost painless,
that Senior Prom at the Latin Quarter—
Count Basie and Sarah Vaughan, and you
just interested in your date's cleavage
and staying out all night at Jones Beach,
the small dune fires fueled by driftwood.
You can't remember a riff or a song,
and your date's a woman now, married,
has had sex as you have
some few thousand times, good sex
and forgettable sex, even boring sex,
oh you never could have imagined
back then with the waves crashing
what the body could erase.
It's vanishing as you speak, the soul-grit,
the story-fodder,
everything you retrieve is your past,
everything you let go
goes to memory's out-box, open on all sides,
in cahoots with thin air.
The jobs you didn't get vanish like scabs.
Her good-bye, causing the phone to slip
from your hand, doesn't hurt anymore,
too much doesn't hurt anymore,
not even that hint of your father, ghost-thumping
on your roof in Spain, hurts anymore.
You understand and therefore hate
because you hate the passivity of understanding

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that your worst rage and finest
private gesture will flatten and collapse
into history, become invisible
like defeats inside houses. Then something happens
(it is happening) which won't vanish fast enough,
your voice fails, chokes to silence;
hurt (how could you have forgotten?) hurts,
every other truth in the world, out of respect,
slides over, makes room for its superior.

A Good Life

It was on evenings like this,
in spite of the good talk
and drink, no more love-worries
than usual, and a fine commotion
of crickets in the late summer heat,
it was on evenings like this he knew
his true life lay elsewhere, it must,
so much acceptable pleasure here
yet so much yearning. He was home,
some muted pinprick of unease
prodding him, dully, from afar.

He told a story about a black bear
who swam the Delaware Water Gap
to get to New Jersey, where bears
can't be hunted, a story of animal wisdom,
survival. As if the bear knew,
as if there were a secret network of bears.

His guests were pleased.

The state of Pennsylvania wanted its bear
returned. In fact, New Jersey owed them
nine bears, there was proof.

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Like certain departures, betrayals,
it became a matter for the courts—
the rights of bears, of hunters and bureaucrats . . .

You can walk out of your life
if sadness properly instructs you.
And can't humiliation send you,
knees bleeding, over the forbidden wall?
That's what he was thinking
as his wife poured more wine for the guests,
as a beneficent moon half-lit the yard
and the erotics of friendship
made its edgy argument against despair.

The guests left; it was time.
He and his wife cleaned up, talked,
made sweet, drunken love.
Nothing was wrong. Nothing was wrong
except there was this life,
intuited, unclaimed.
He suspected she sensed it too, hers,
something more utterly hers.

Elsewhere bears were trusting their bodies
to take them to safety, but what did bears know
about water and wind and chance?
He could see a bear caught in turbulence,
swept downriver, where no law
could keep it from being killed.

It's a comedy, he thought.
His hand was resting on her hip,
it could be anybody's hip,
anybody's hand . . . In a dream
Stendhal heard Don Juan speak:
"There are not twenty different sorts of women,
and once you've had two or three of each sort,
boredom sets in." To which Stendhal said,

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"A man who trembles is not bored."

Maybe it was all about trembling,
some old trepidation before the next step.
Maybe, like Stendhal, you connive
to give yourself a wake-up call
in the middle of the night.
He kissed her, and in the settled dark
rolled away into the other world
of their bed. It was easy.
  No, that was not applause
coming from the crickets.
He understood that relentless buzz, more
than mere desire, less than misery.

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Susan Wheeler

Debates

Damn it Graw you've got the sponge
on the wrong side of the ketchup bottle.
Have not shithead. And thus we drift
like a loggering glacier
straightways into a century.
Hulk's crocheted a tissue box cover.
I pasted the floral decals on the soap.
Hey HONEY *how 'bout some* TLC?

It's only here beside the birdhouses
where Federica, Duchess of Ostheim,
plots in a pique, that the rotting birds re-
compose, assemble and then raise up
tailwards their bungling flocks.

Hester hadn't asked for anything more than that.
Collecting the **big** change had knocked the
wind out of her, and the thurifer had forgotten
a light. Day in, day out, an
infernal crumpling and exhaling:
the hay field in sudden illumination
or a malicious wave from the booth.

Even with sentinels, the ants are circling.
I asked you to wash up for dinner.

The orators clamped on their goggles and helmets
and then had another go. In kitchens men
turned to Lucy. The breakfasts once
imagined were lackluster now. And the
golden expansion was loose as a cannon
while the memory of promise mopped up.

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Give me the hammer.
Hey wake up, bozo.
After all, other people had built—but now
the skipper rounds the bend, checks out shore,
and lumbers past to Circe. *Give it a rest willya*
and help me with this stripping. A girl winks from
behind
a glass elevator chute.

Phil whispered with that superior look on her face.
One of the orators dropped his cigarettes, which as
she knew
booted him out of the pie-throw routine.
Count to ten slowly. Don't break your stride.
Remember your affirmations, oh HP nation.
The nails now tumbling from the window ledge
each lodge when they fall behind an ear.

Vaudeville smoke, brains on fire, poppies
in the blue field beyond the great lawn,
deliberate dots on ice. The senses they forego,
stapling each thumb in place, for a long campaign.
I said the glue, dipshit. Oh come on here.

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Two Poems by Jovan Hristić

That Night They All Gathered on the Highest Tower

That night they all gathered on the highest tower:
Astronomers, mathematicians and one magi from Syria
To read in the stars the glory of the King of Kings,
And demonstrate his immortality with the help of geometry.

Just before dawn, they nodded their heads in accord
With each other's interpretations. The answer of the stars
Was positive. The trumpets announced
The glory of the King of Kings to the rising sun.

In the palace, at the table set for the feast, they were awaited
By the one to whom the stars gave their word tonight,
And whose future now overflowed like new wine
Which in the golden chalices awaited the toasts.

Only some youth who only recently mastered geometry,
Was not fully convinced by what was read in the stars,
For the stars always give their answer to mortals
But to what question, only they themselves know.

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A Sentimental Voyage around My Room

Slowly, the summer was ending with a shower. We
were
Not given to conclude our travels. We remained
forgetting
The strength of the beginning in the vain happiness of
the end.

I was meeting myself again in the same silence and
the sea,
That future life, slept in the anemic sunlight
While the old poison slowly filled my whole
bloodstream.

Beginning in the same room, and in the same one
ending,
While the same battles covered the walls like shadows
Awaiting their wings. Slowly, the summer was ending
with a shower.

Eyes of some future morning, forgive us who will
never
Know about you. Forgive our rooms, while the old
poison already
Went on slowly filling our whole bloodstream.

—translated from the Serbo-Croatian
by Charles Simic

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Two Poems by Laura Fargas

If There Is A

If there is a God, he has a lot to answer for.
Crocuses, purple cups that bloom through snow.
Cerulean, cornflower, azure, turquoise, ultramarine.
Mist off round haybales along the Sand Road
just after 5 A.M., when the foxes go to ground.
Not only the obvious evils, but also these other things
we should not mistake for easy.

Reflecting What Light We Can't Absorb

Sing, choirs. We waken into this fire
simple as crickets, our own light
blurred in the sparkle of particulars.
Leaf, leaf, leaf, leaf, leaf.
Somewhere in the transparency between
sun behind it and the greenness in my mind,
the lessons of grass ignite.

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The String Bag

Günter Grass

Chance put the widower next to the widow. Or maybe chance had nothing to do with it, for the story began on All Souls. Be that as it may, the widow was already there when the widower tripped, stumbled, but did not fall.

He stood beside her. Shoe size ten beside shoe size eight. Widow and widower met facing the wares of a peasant woman: mushrooms heaped in a basket or spread out on newsprint and three buckets filled with cut flowers. The woman was sitting to one side of the covered market in the midst of other truck farmers and the produce of their small plots: celery, rutabaga the size of a child's head, leeks and beets.

His diary confirms "All Souls" and makes no mystery of the shoe sizes. What made him stumble was the edge of the curbstone, but the word *chance* does not occur in his diary. "It may have been fate that brought us together that day on the stroke of ten o'clock . . ." His attempt to give body to the third person, the silent intermediary, remains vague, as does his bumbling attempt to pin down the color of her head scarf: "Not exactly umber, more

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earth-brown than peat-black . . ." He has better luck with the brickwork of the monastery wall: "Infested with scab . . ."

Only a few varieties of cut flowers were left in the buckets: dahlias, asters, chrysanthemums. The basket was full of chestnuts. Four or five boletus mushrooms with slight slug damage were lined up on the title page of an ancient issue of the local paper *Głos Wybrzeża.* Also a bunch of parsley and a roll of wrapping paper. The cut flowers looked bedraggled: leftovers.

"No wonder," writes the widower, "that this and other stands in St. Dominic's Market seemed so poorly supplied. Flowers are much in demand on All Souls. Even on All Saints, the day before, the demand often exceeds the supply . . ."

Though dahlias and chrysanthemums are showier, the widow decided in favor of asters. The widower was hesitant: even if "the surprisingly late mushrooms" and chestnuts may have lured him to this particular stand, "I'm certain that after a moment's dismay—or could it have been the ringing of the bells?—I gave in to a special sort of seduction—no, call it magnetism . . ."

When from the three or four buckets the widow took a first, a second, then hesitantly a third aster, exchanged this last for another and pulled out a fourth, which also had to be put back and replaced, the widower began to take asters from buckets and, no less picky and choosy than the widow, to exchange them; he chose rust red asters just as she had chosen rust red asters, though white and pale violet ones were still available. The color harmony went to his head: "What gentle consonance. Like her, I am especially fond of the rust red, how quietly they smolder . . ." Be that as it may, they both concentrated on rust red asters until there were no more left in the buckets.

Neither widow nor widower had enough for a bouquet. She was ready to shove her meager selection back into one of the buckets when the so-called plot set in: the

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widower handed the widow his rust red spoils. He held them out, she took them. A wordless surrender. Never to be reversed. Inextinguishably burning asters. That made for a bond between them.

The conversation began with "May I?" Wishing to pay not only for his own asters but for the whole new unified bouquet, and somewhat bewildered by the look of a currency so rich in zeroes, he drew banknotes from his wallet. The widow said with an accent, "You may nothing."

Her use of the foreign language may have lent additional sharpness to her negative reply, and if her next remark—"Is now pretty bouquet, yes?"—hadn't opened the door to conversation, the chance encounter between widower and widow might have begged comparison with the diminishing rate of the złoty.

He writes that while the widow was still paying, a conversation had started up about mushrooms, especially the late, belated boletus. The summer that had seemed endless and the mild autumn were cited as reasons. "But when I said something about global warming, she just laughed."

On a sunny to partly cloudy November day the two of them stood face to face. It seemed as though nothing could separate them from the flowers and the mushrooms. He had fallen for her, she for him. The widow laughed frequently. Her accented sentences were preceded and followed by laughter that seemed groundless, just a little prelude and postlude. The widower liked this almost shrill laugh, for he wrote in his diary: "Like a bellbird, sometimes frightening, I have to admit, but I enjoy the sound of her laughter and never ask what seems to amuse her. Maybe she's laughing at me. But even that, even for her to think me laughable, gives me pleasure."

So they stood here. If she was fashionably dressed—he thought her "too modishly done up"—his tweed jacket

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and corduroy trousers gave him the look of shabby elegance that went with his camera case—a traveler for educational purposes, the better type of tourist. "If you won't accept the flowers, suppose we go back to the subject of the conversation we had just started, namely, mushrooms; will you permit me to select this one and perhaps this one, and make you a present of them? They look inviting."

She would. And she watched carefully to make sure that he wouldn't peel off too many bills for the market woman. "Here is all so crazy expensive," she cried. "But cheap perhaps for a gentleman with deutschmarks."

He offered to carry her string bag. She held on tight. He said please. She said no, "Pay then carry is too much." A slight battle, a tussle, taking care, however, not to harm the contents of the string bag, kept the two of them in place, as if they were unwilling to leave the spot where they had met. Back and forth they pulled the string bag. Nor was he allowed to carry the asters. A well-rehearsed battle—they might have known each other for years.

They didn't lack an audience. The market woman looked on in silence, and there were witnesses all around: the octagonal fortress tower, with its latest subtenant, the overcrowded exchange bureau, and next to it the broad-beamed covered market that seemed bloated with mist, and the gloomy Dominican Church of St. Nikolai. And the peasant women in the adjoining stands, and finally the potential customers, all making an impoverished crowd, driven only by their day-to-day needs, their scant funds diminishing in value by the hour, while widow and widower looked upon each other as money in the bank and showed no desire to separate.

"Now I go to different place."

"May I come with you, please?"

"Well, it's far."

"It would be a pleasure, really . . ."

"But it's cemetery where I go."

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"I'll try not to bother you."
"All right, come."

To abbreviate their walk to the cemetery: Smoking, the widow led the widower out of the city across a bridge, which, since the demolition of the fortifications and the construction of the main railroad station, arches over the railroad tracks leading westward from Danzig or Gdańsk or eastward to Gdańsk or Danzig. The widow led him out of the city to the Olivaer Tor streetcar stop; then, via the left fork of the highway to Kartuzy, up the gently sloping Hagelsberg to the service station for tourists intent on unleaded gasoline, across from which there is an old cemetery shaded by beeches and lindens which formerly belonged to the parishes of Corpus Christi, further up to those of St. Joseph and St. Bridget, and on the western edge to various "nonsectarian" religious congregations. Overcrowded for years, it now seemed abandoned. No open gate provided access. They walked along a fence overgrown with shrubbery. Across from the adjacent military cemetery was a Red Army war memorial on whose lawn some teenagers were playing soccer. The widow knew a hole in the fence.

Once inside—under trees and among overgrown, neglected single and double graves—the widower proffered a formal introduction: "Please allow me to introduce myself, as I should have done long ago. My name is Alexander Reschke."

The widow's laughter took time, and must have struck him as out of place, especially here among tombs. Nevertheless, still laughing, she followed suit: "Alexandra Piatkowska."

•

He asked her to dinner in the restaurant back at his hotel.

She declined. "Expensive as sin and food no good," and invited him out instead. "All right. We go."

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It wasn't far, only a few steps past St. James's Church. They ate by candlelight, and as Piatkowska had promised, "Real Polish cooking like Mama's in Wilno."

During the meal—appetizer, main course, dessert—the two of them behaved like a couple who have a great deal to say to each other. Not that he spoke of his dead wife or she of her husband who had died so young. Nothing that rankled, only well-digested memories. Brief reference was made to her son, who was studying philosophy in Bremen, and to his three working and more or less married daughters. "The man you see before you is twice a grandfather."

The conversation was a little disjointed. It touched briefly on politics—"Now soon the Wall comes down"—exchanged national clichés for a while, the qualities that are supposed to be typical of Poles and Germans, and slipped back time and again into shoptalk, particularly since Alexandra had for months at a time been busy gilding the inscriptions and ornaments of wooden and stone epitaphs, most recently in St. Nikolai. The names and escutcheons of extinct patrician families, from magistrate and alderman Angermünde to merchant Schwarzwaldt, whom Holbein painted in London and whose escutcheon, despite the red of the tongue and the blue of the helmet, was basically black and gold, to Johann Uphagen's coat of arms, in which the knobby beak of the silver swan held a golden horseshoe—she was familiar with them all, including Ferber and his three pigs' heads, down to the most finicky curlicue and helmet ornament. The gildress moved with less assurance in the field of smooth-trodden memorial slabs, so it was not out of mere politeness that she asked Reschke to send her his dissertation someday. "You see, Herr Professor, when people get as old as us, feeling is not enough. We have to know. Not everything, but details lots."

Then complications. She insisted on paying. He had to give in. But when she took him the short distance back

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to his hotel and was about to return to Hundegasse alone through the poorly lit streets, he asserted himself, took her arm and shuffled along beside her, while she clack-clacked in her high heels, as far as the steps of her front terrace in whose sandstone relief the games of the putti and little cupids were barely discernible.

From street corner to street corner they seem to have spoken less and less. He notes only her sudden fear that when the Wall between West and East came down, everything might be more difficult. "In Dresden no more People's gold leaf will be. Will be shortages . . ."

And then the widow dismissed him with a quick kiss and a routine "Write if you feel like it . . ." Left standing at the door, the widower started shuffling back to his hotel.

Shortly after eleven, he asked for his key, took the elevator to the fourteenth floor, opened the door to his room, changed into the slippers that accompanied him on every trip, washed his hands with his own soap, sat down, bent over his notebook, opened his glasses case and put on his reading glasses. Then shut the case and reached, as if in a hurry to gain written assurance of his own existence, for his fountain pen.

There was a knocking at the door. Twice softly, once loud.

"It's me again," said the widow Alexandra Piatkowska when shortly before midnight she called on the widower Alexander Reschke.

She arrived breathless, carrying not only her shoulder bag but also another of her string bags. This time it was a brown and blue one with a zigzag pattern. In haste, as if someone had lit a fire behind her, she had picked up this, that and the other, and without stopping to catch her breath ran after Alexander, who by then must have been passing St. Dominic's Market, ran with short, clattering high-heel steps.

"I completely forgot. You take this on your trip."

The contents of the string bag: a jar of pickled beets,

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a few dried boletus mushrooms on a knotted string and a walnut-sized chunk of amber "with a gnat in it!" She took off her mouse gray raincoat and her jacket and stood before him in a glossy light blue silk blouse with dark sweat stains under the armpits, still breathless.

He saw her sweat spots. She saw him in bedroom slippers. She let the string bag with contents slip to the floor. He took off his glasses and still found time for the case. She took a short step, he a stumbling step, then she another, and he likewise. And they fell, lay in each other's arms.

That's how it must have been, though Reschke confided only a few details to his diary: the string bag, the dried mushrooms, the pickled beets, the amber with the gnat and the dark blue spots of sweat. As the widower noticed in his diary the next morning, the widow had brought her toothbrush—"an astonishing but sensible precaution," he called it. And in the solemn tone reserved for glad tidings, he cited Alexandra's words, laughingly spoken after midnight or early in the morning: "We are lucky, Alexander, because is passed, my change of life." "How Alexandra calls a spade a spade."

Then references to the narrow single bed and the repulsive spots on the carpet. And after the barest suggestion of a disagreement—he wanted to turn off the light, she didn't—his confession: "Yes, we loved, we had the power to love, and no one stopped us. And I—O God—I was capable of love!"

That's all. In the light of day or in the half-darkness: he thin but not withered; she firm and round but not fat. They'll do as a couple.

Alexandra and Alexander slept little. They seem to have mastered the task of making love. At their age patience is needed and the kind of humor that ignores the possibility of defeat. As they were able to assure each other at breakfast in the hotel restaurant, neither snored during their brief spells of exhausted sleep.

They handled their parting quickly. After paying for

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the single room he said: "Have no fear, Alexandra. You'll hear from me. You'll never get away from me now."

And as his suitcase stood beside them ready to be picked up, she said to him: "I know, Alexander. And on highway don't drive too fast. Now I am no longer widow."

Piatkowska left before Reschke carried his suitcase to the parking lot. That's what they had arranged. He tipped the porter, though not allowing him to carry the suitcase. A sunny to partly cloudy morning. A northwest wind blowing the sulfur stench of the docks in the harbor to other places.

—translated from the German
by Ralph Manheim

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Portfolio

The Dust Blows Forward and the Dust Blows Back

Craig Roper

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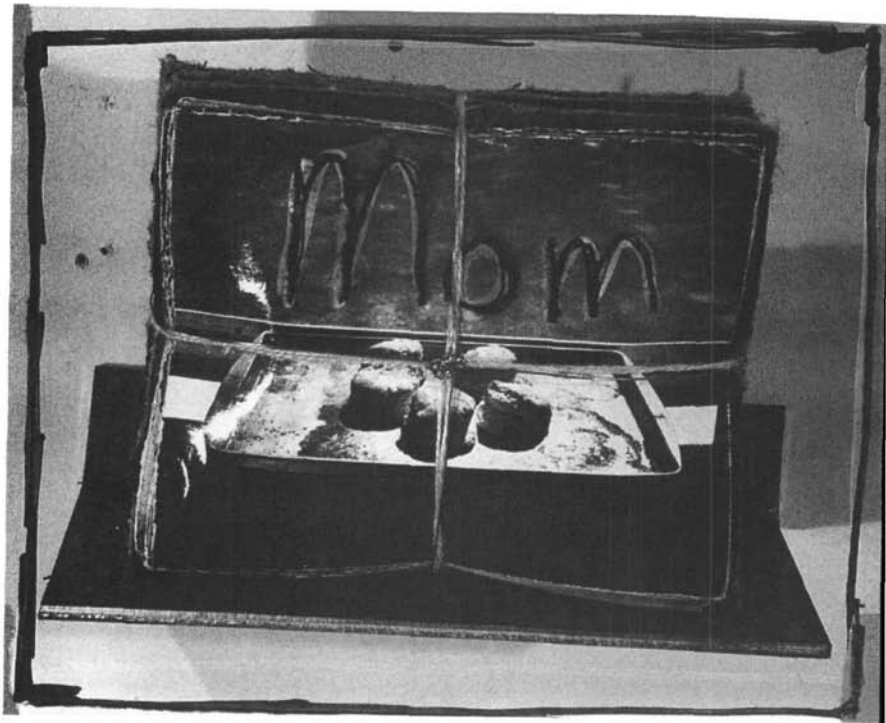

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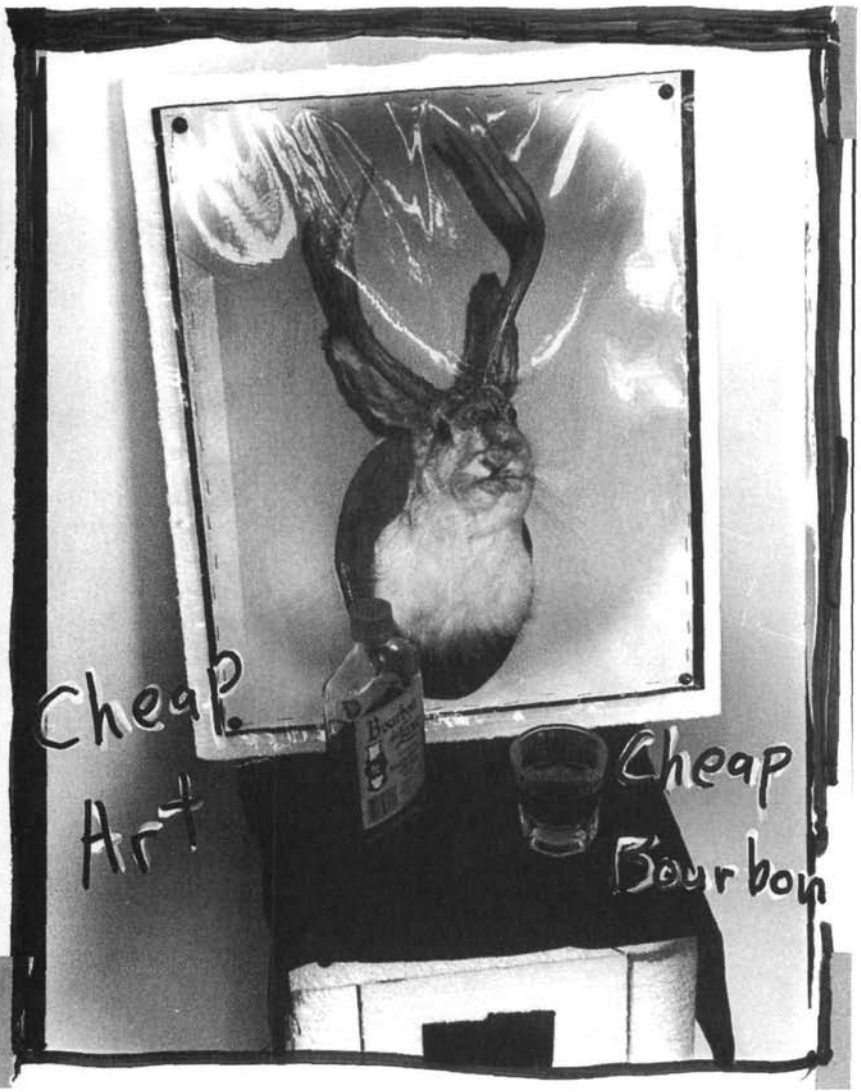

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COWBOYS

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Indians

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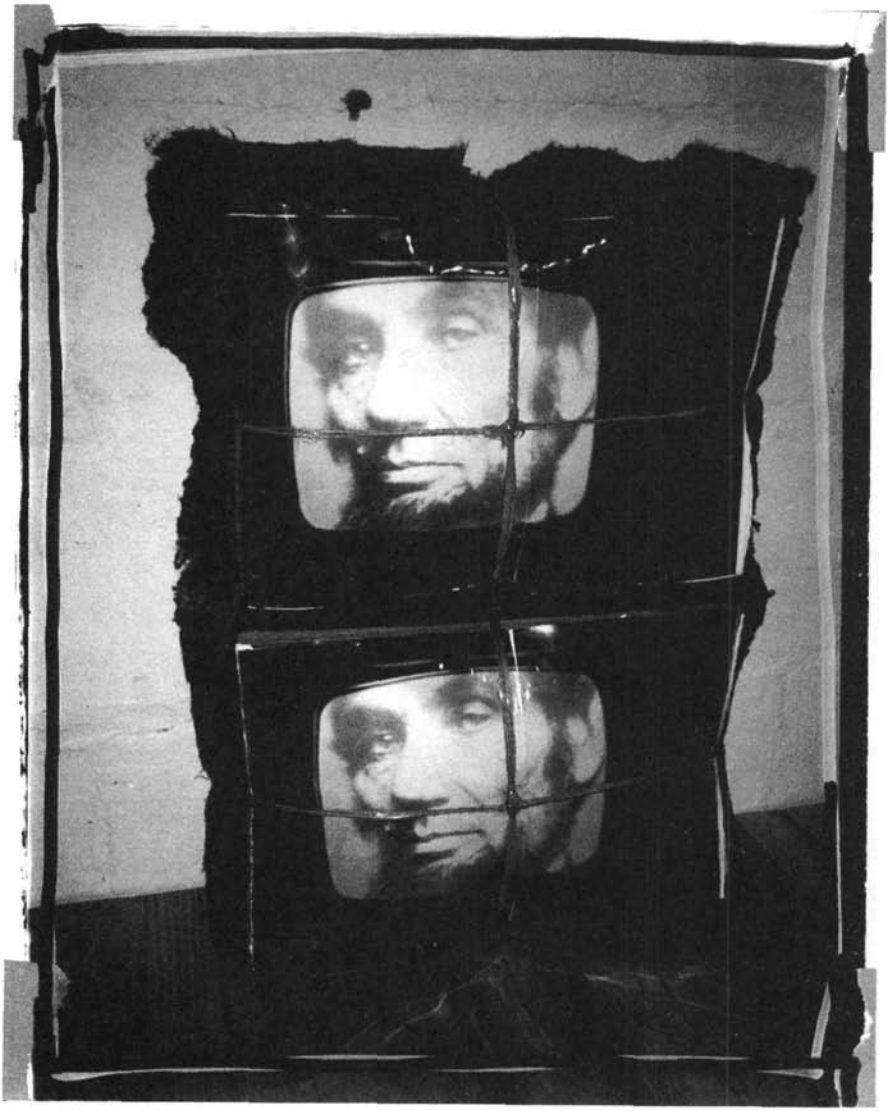

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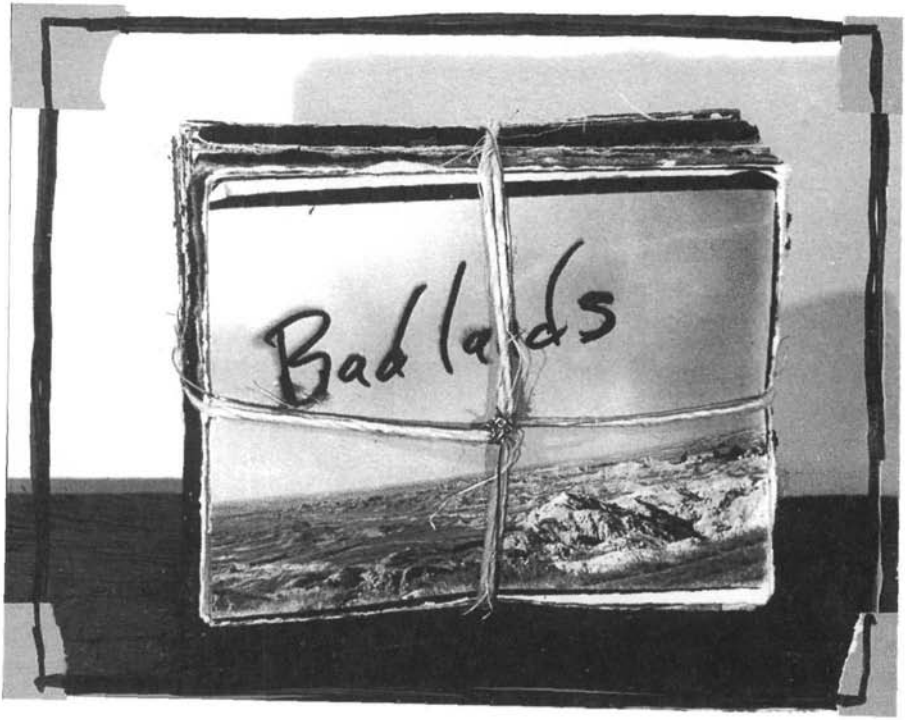

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Two Poems by Chase Twichell

Bad Movie, Bad Audience

Matinées are the best time
for bad movies—squad cars
spewing orange flame, the telephone
dead in the babysitter's hand.
Glinting with knives and missiles,
men stalk through the double
wilderness of sex and war
all through the eerie
fictions of the afternoon.
The audience is restless,
a wicked ocean roughing up its boats.
It makes a noise I seem to need.
The ruby bracelet
clinks against the handcuff,
all the cars make squealing sounds.
The kid in front of me
wants more candy,
rocks in her velvet seat. *Shut up,*
says her mother, maybe seventeen.
Just shut the fuck up.
The corpses of the future
drift across the galaxy with nothing
in their stiff, irradiated hands.
In our ears the turbo revs,
the cheekbone cracks,
a stocking slithers to the floor.
Cocteau said film is death at work.
Out of the twilight a small voice
hisses *shut up, just shut the fuck up.*

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A Seduction

I had a dream so pure of form
it slipped intact from the dark:

out of a narrow cleft in granite,
a waterfall sluiced
down through damp mosses, lichens,
ferns in a glitter of thrown drops.
(I used to fish for trout shadows
there, in childhood,
where the partridgeberry trailed
its small green disks in the spray.)
I could smell the humus
under the trembling leaves.
But there was another scent—
familiar, *interior:*

I was inside, looking out through
a crude window, a hole
in the wall of massive stones,
and saw the lit candles
overflowing on the ledge,
the long lily petals,
gray-edged and shrunken,
dropping onto the black crepe.
It was a place of remembrance
for the dead, and I thought:

the jewels in the brook
are the lights of grief.
The beloved is already dead:

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all the green frailties
and sacramental waters
before the naked species
came to feed on them,
and the virulent armies went forth
leaking excrement and fuel
to colonize the last shreds of paradise.

O beautiful window cut from the dark.
In the moment of death
can I climb through the bright rectangle
into the resurrection,
a heaven preserved within myself?
I've lost the way.
O dream, come back for me.

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Richard Tillinghast

Aubade

Steam in the pipes.
Birdsong muted.
A prowl of cat.
Ivy on a wall, the breeze layering it,
seen through venetians.
An arm thrown over the
edge of the bed.

A stocking, a twisted undergarment, shoes.
Empty matchbooks, full ashtrays,
fume of brandy over a glass.

She gets that last twenty
minutes of sleep she likes.
He runs a razor over his jaw,
looking into the steamed mirror in a daze.

Luggage placed by a door.
Some keys on a Queen Anne table.

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Two Poems by Lisel Mueller

Imaginary Paintings

1. How I Would Paint the Future

A strip of horizon and a figure,
seen from the back, forever approaching.

2. How I Would Paint Happiness

Something sudden, a windfall,
a meteor shower. No—
a flowering tree releasing
all its blossoms at once,
and the one standing beneath it
unexpectedly robed in bloom,
transformed into a stranger
too beautiful to touch.

3. How I Would Paint Death

White on white or black on black.
No ground, no figure. An immense canvas,
which I will never finish.

4. How I Would Paint Love

I would not paint love.

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5. How I Would Paint the Leap of Faith

A black cat jumping up three feet
to reach a three-inch shelf.

6. How I Would Paint the Big Lie

Smooth, and deceptively small
so that it can be swallowed
like something we take for a cold.
An elongated capsule,
an elegant cylinder,
sweet and glossy,
that pleases the tongue
and goes down easy,
never mind
the poison inside.

7. How I Would Paint Nostalgia

An old-fashioned painting, a genre piece.
People in bright and dark clothing.
A radiant bride in white
standing above a waterfall,
watching the water rush
away, away, away.

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Mirrors

After I put on lipstick
I turn my hand mirror upside down.
I know that mirrors can start fires—
and why shouldn't they,
they see too much of us.
Imagine absorbing so much beauty
and so much pain in silence:
involuntary confidantes
like chambermaids with their tongues cut out.
Not a hint of bloodshot eyes
or brilliant acts of coverup
to anyone. But with us
they're utterly relentless,
since truth is what we ask for—
and how can we expect them
to blur and show us mercy
when the face, that peach or apple,
puckers and blotches, when red and pink
fade like the gorgeous ephemera
of summer? Of course they see
that we grow to hate them;
that's the thanks they get.
No wonder there are times
when it takes only the sun's
intrusive glare to make them explode.

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Bruce Beasley

Eve, Learning to Speak

A world already named, already
deposed
in the urge of his stressed
consonants, vowels
slack:
mood and *doom* and *sundown, logbridge*
and *pear,*
the gouge of the creek, hunched
leaves—

For days I called him *I,*

called the root in his fist
water, called what fire does
bathe—

He'd close me
for hours in the rivercliff
cave, as punishment,
to make me remember,
then he'd teach me its name: *alone.*

Alone,
I practiced the unnatural sounds,
touching my lips as he did, feeling air
move through my throat, my chest,

letting it stay there.

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Then sometimes the hush, the
thrill
of seeing things I hadn't learned to say,
things he hadn't claimed yet with his tongue:
once I woke, wet, hands muddy,
to something quick and burning
cutting over the trees.
And pieces of river
clinging to the spiderswings
between the crimped, rough applelimbs:

I would have kept that
as it was, tangible, alien,
let the memory
swell, unsayable—
and I stared at him,
refusing words,
when he came to rescue me
and teach me *rain* and *lightning.*

But some things
I kept as my own: the hurt
low in my body
he knew nothing of.
I came to like it. And my own
name for the land:
not "Eden,"
not, even, a sound,
nothing that the body could reproduce . . .

He wanted everything
common, reduced, so we could
exchange it, as though it were breath,
as though I still lay
deep in the bone and muscle of his side.
Sometimes I'd see myself
as I thought he must:

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cut-off, inviolable,
and I'd sit with him
and watch the high, cold grasses
all blowing one way.
I'd give in and let my strange
voice come.
And I'd feel the world diminishing, name by name,
as we talked through the long hours, and my new
life

hardened into form.

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Two Poems by Jeremy Reed

Seven Admissions

1
The trees are equal to the wind tonight.
Our thoughts are in a foreign town. One dream
gives the lemon wings—and the orange flight.

2
What if the owl contrived to get inside
our room. A white owl with emerald eyes.
Would there be head-space in which we could hide?

3
When we last spoke, we suggested the sea.
Your white triangle underneath a white
thong-backed V'd isosceles bikini.

4
Why did the swan have oars crossing the lake,
white oars for a black swan? The image stayed
on my dream view-finder like a snowflake.

5
Writing means making a trek to China,
crossing so many mental continents,
wearing a mountain as a tiara.

6
Adjusting my thoughts, you are luminous,
throwing a planetary light on the room.
Your tongue flickers and it's adventurous.

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7
You kiss me through a square of silk. A grape
breaks open in my mouth. I know you now,
sinuous, pliant in your feline shape.

Taxi to the End of the World

And it was nothing, so the driver said,
digesting elephant steaks or zebra,
his stomach open like a corolla
discussing protein, toxins, Manhattan,
extreme eating because the planet's dead,

and he'd be going back after this ride
to the old cities, his box apartment.
'Someone's got to stay': my presentiment
was of him looting, fisting out diamonds
from display cards. Our wheels skirted the tide

and there were cattle and a family
knee-deep in water looking for a place
to cross; a bridge sunk beneath the surface
of rising waters. We went into hills,
making a detour to meet with the sea

on the last coast. The man spoke of nomads,
straggling tribes who had marched on the desert
listening for instructions, ways to alert
themselves to power, and of politicians
making suicide-pacts on pyramids.

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We passed the first shacks put up on this coast.
Numeral calculations done in blood
were wildly calligraphized on white wood.
A lion-tamer instructed his child,
a group of long-haired men sat around lost;

and here the taxi stopped, he wouldn't go
right to the end, and he was obstinate.
He spoke of dangers and he had a date
that evening; love and barbecued camel,
one of the last from a blackmarket zoo.

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Two Poems by Jane Hirshfield

The Weighing

The heart's reasons
seen clearly,
even the hardest
will carry
its whip-marks and sadness
and must be forgiven,

as the drought-starved
eland forgives
the drought-starved lion
who finally takes her,
enters willingly then
the life she cannot refuse,
and is lion, is fed,
and does not remember the other.

So few grains of happiness
measured against all the dark
and still the scales balance.

The world asks of us
only the strength we have and we give it.
Then it asks more, and we give it.

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The Heart As Origami

Each one has its shape.
For love, two sleeping ducks.
For selfless courage, the war horse.
For fear of death, the daylily's one-day flower.
More and more creased each year, worn paper thin,
and still it longs for them all.
Not one of the lives of this world the heart does not
choose.

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Two Poems by Mary Oliver

Death and the Dealer of Death

What could be worse
than its body
inching out of the dark stuff

of the dead stump
deep in the woods?
I remember

how it flushed forth
from the tap of my boot-toe
and how the fear showered

in my red veins
like a black fire.
Yet this was worse:

on the pale lawn,
in the white morning,
in the safe place

I found it, slack and powerless
and belly-up.
How came it to be there?

What had stopped it
flowing from one hem
of darkness to another?

What could it mean?
A riddle
I would have climbed ten miles

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through the leafy woods
to stay away from,
it lay in the light. The vivid,

the sudden,
the dreadful,
the finished.

The Swan

Did you too see it, drifting, all night, on the black river?
Did you see it in the morning, rising into the silvery air—
an armful of white blossoms,
a perfect commotion of silk and linen as it leaned
into the bondage of its wings; a snowbank, a bank of lilies,
biting the air with its black beak?

Did you hear it, fluting and whistling
a shrill dark music—like rain pelting the trees—like a waterfall
knifing down the black ledges?

And did you see it, finally, just under the clouds—
a white cross
streaming across the sky, its feet
like black leaves, its wings
like the stretched light of the river?

And did you feel it, in your heart, how it pertained to everything?
And have you too finally figured out what beauty is for?
And have you changed your life?

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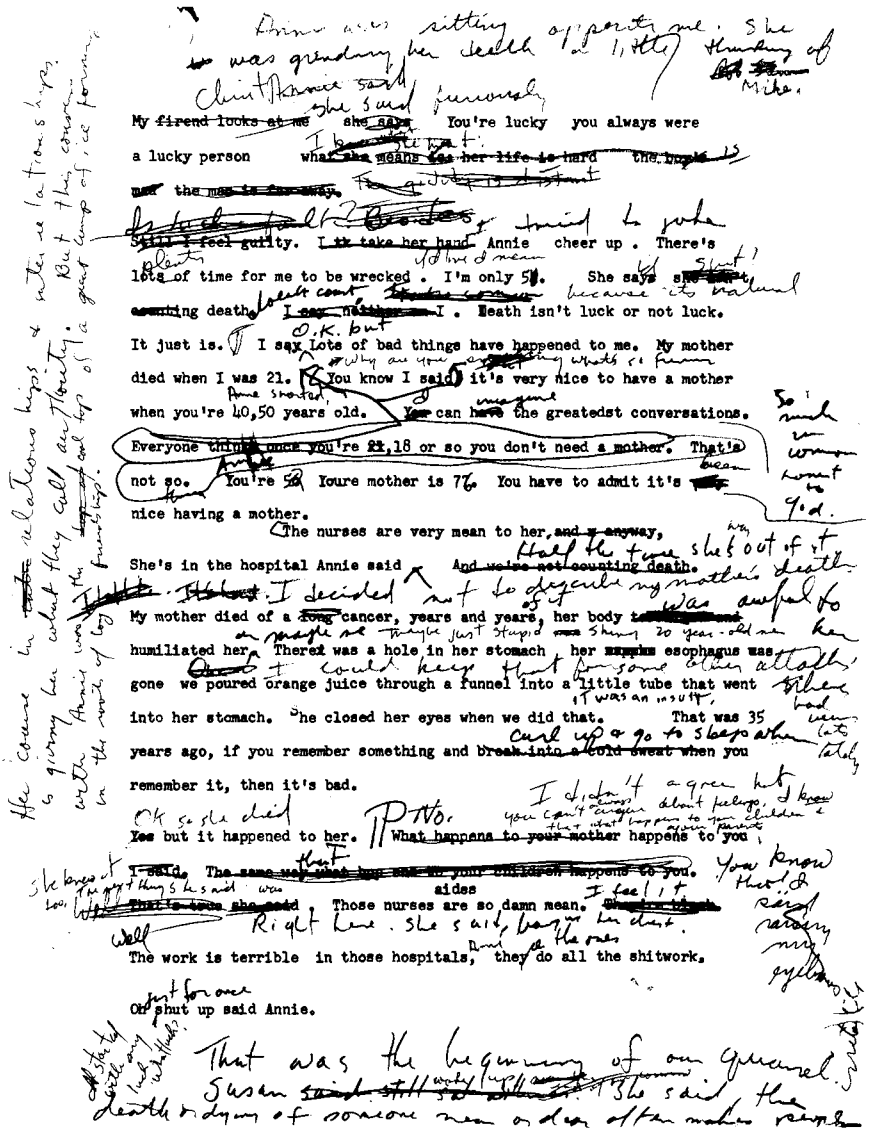

A manuscript page by Grace Paley from the story "Friends" in Enormous Changes at the Last Minute.

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Grace Paley

The Art of Fiction CXXXI

When Grace Paley visits New York she stays in her old apartment on West Eleventh Street. Her block has for the most part escaped the gentrification that has transformed the West Village since Paley moved there in the forties. The building where Paley lived for most of her adult life and where she raised her two children by her first husband, the filmmaker Jess Paley, is a rent-controlled brownstone walk-up with linoleum hallways. Mercifully spared mid-career renovations, Paley's apartment retains the disheveled, variegated look of an apartment with children. Paley now lives in Thetford, Vermont with her second husband, poet and playwright Robert Nichols, but we arranged to speak with her in New York. We met her on the

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street outside her apartment—she was returning home from a Passover celebration with friends elsewhere in the city. We recognized her from half a block away—a tiny woman with fluffy white hair in a brown overcoat.

People often ask Grace Paley why she has written so little—three story collections and three chapbooks of poetry in seventy years. Paley has a number of answers to this question. Mostly she explains that she is lazy and that this is her major flaw as a writer. Occasionally she will admit that, though it is "not nice" of her to say so, she believes that she can accomplish as much in a few stories as her longer-winded colleagues do in a novel. And she points out that she has had many other important things to do with her time, such as raising children and participating in politics. "Art," she explains, "is too long, and life is too short." Paley is noticeably unaffected by the pressures of mortality which drive most writers to publish. Donald Barthelme scavenged her apartment for the stories that made up her first book, and her agent says she periodically raids Paley's drawers and kitchen cabinets for material. Her first collection of stories, The Little Disturbances of Man, *did not appear until 1959, when Paley was thirty-seven. Since then she has published just two collections of stories—*Enormous Changes at the Last Minute *in 1974 and* Later the Same Day *in 1985—and three collections of poems—*Leaning Forward *(1985),* New and Collected Poems *(1992) and* Long Walks and Intimate Talks *(1991). Though Paley is better known as a short-story writer than as a poet, her stories are so dense and rigorously pruned that they frequently resemble poetry as much as fiction. Her conversation is as cerebral and distilled as her prose. The oft-noted Paley paradox is the contrast between her grandmotherly appearance and her no-schmaltz personality. Paley says only what is necessary. Ask her a yes-or-no question, she will answer yes or no. Ask her a foolish question, and she will kindly but clearly convey her impatience. Talking with her, one develops the impression that she listens and speaks in two different, sometimes conflicting capacities. As a person she is tolerant and easygoing, as a user of words, merciless. On politics Paley speaks unreservedly and in earnest; on writing she is drier, more careful.*

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Grace Goodside was born in the Bronx in December, 1922, seventeen years after her parents immigrated to New York and one year after the invention of the sanitary napkin (as she notes in her poem "Song Stanzas of Private Luck"). Her father, Isaac, was a doctor who learned English by reading Dickens and was, like her mother, Mary, a committed socialist. The family spoke Russian and Yiddish at home and English to the world with a Bronx twang that remains one of the more noticeable signs of Paley's attitude towards the establishment. Writing has only occasionally been Paley's main occupation. She spent a lot of time in playgrounds when her children were young. She has always been very active in the feminist and peace movements. She has been on the faculty at City College and taught courses at Columbia University and, until recently, Sarah Lawrence College.

INTERVIEWER

What were you doing before you became a published writer?

GRACE PALEY

I was working part time. I was hanging out a lot. I was kind of lazy. I had my kids when I was about twenty-six, twenty-seven. I took them to the park in the afternoons. Thank God I was lazy enough to spend all that time in Washington Square Park. I say "lazy" but of course it was kind of exhausting running after two babies. Still, looking back I see the pleasure of it. That's when I began to know women very well—as co-workers, really. I had a part-time job as a typist up at Columbia. In fact, when I began to write stories, I typed some up there, and some in the PTA office of PS 41 on 11th Street. If I hadn't spent that time in the playground, I wouldn't have written a lot of those stories. That's pretty much how I lived. And then we had our normal family life, struggles and hard times. That takes up a lot of time, hard times. Uses up whole days.

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INTERVIEWER

Could you tell the story of the publication of your first book?

PALEY

I'd written three stories, and I liked them. I showed them to my former husband, Jess Paley, and he liked them, and he showed them to a couple of friends, and *they* liked them, so I was feeling pretty good about them. The kids were still young at the time, and they played a lot with the neighborhood kids, so I got to know the other mothers in the neighborhood. One of them was Tibby McCormick, who had just gotten unmarried from Ken McCormick, an editor at Doubleday. She knew about these stories, and poor Ken was more or less forced into reading them—you know, "the kids are over at her house all the time, you *might* read her stories." So he took them home and read them and he came over to see me and said, "Write seven more of them and we'll publish a book." So that's what happened. Luck happened. He also told me that no magazine around would touch them, and he was pretty much right about that too, although two of the stories in that collection were finally taken by *Accent*.

INTERVIEWER

Do you have a particular reader in mind when you write?

PALEY

As far as I know I'm not writing *to* anybody. Writers often write about what they want to read or haven't seen written. Sometimes I write *for* people—I wrote a story called "Debts" about the mother of a friend of mine. I wanted my friend to like it, although I didn't write it to please her. But that was different from writing *to* someone. I wrote "The Toy Inventor" about a guy on Sixth Avenue who later told me I understood him better than

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his wife. But I wasn't writing it *to* him so much as speaking *for* him. Still, there's always that first storytelling impulse: "I want to tell you something . . ."

INTERVIEWER

How do stories begin for you?

PALEY

A lot of them begin with a sentence—they all begin with language. It sounds dopey to say that, but it's true. Very often one sentence is absolutely resonant. A story can begin with someone speaking. "I was popular in certain circles," for example; an aunt of mine said that, and it hung around in my head for a long time. Eventually I wrote a story, "Goodbye and Good Luck," that began with that line, though it had nothing to do with my aunt. Another example: "There were two husbands disappointed by eggs," which is the first sentence of "The Used-Boy Raisers." I was at the house of a friend of mine, thirty-five years ago, and there were her two husbands complaining about the eggs. It was just *right*—so I went home and began the story, though I didn't finish it for months. I'm almost invariably stuck after one page or one paragraph—at which point I have to begin thinking about what the story could possibly be about. I begin by writing paragraphs that don't have an immediate relation to a plot. The sound of the story comes first.

INTERVIEWER

In "A Conversation With My Father" you make a lot of disparaging remarks about plot.

PALEY

Ever since then everybody says I have no plot, which gets me really mad. Plot is *nothing*; plot is simply time, a time line. All our stories have time lines. One thing happens, then another thing happens. What I was really talking about in that story was having a plot settled *in your*

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mind: this is the way the story's going to go. In the next thirty pages or so, this will happen, this will happen, this will happen. That's what I meant.

INTERVIEWER

So you would never start a story with the ending in mind?

PALEY

No. When the ending comes to me, that's when I know I'm going to finish the story. Usually it's around the middle. And then I write the end. And then I change it.

INTERVIEWER

How many drafts do you go through in writing a story?

PALEY

I don't like to count. I never understand what people mean when they say they've done twenty drafts or something. Does that mean they've typed it twenty times, or what? I'm always changing things as I go. It's always substantially different by the time I've finished. I do it till it's done.

INTERVIEWER

Do you take advice from anyone when you write or edit?

PALEY

I listen to what people tell me but I don't always act on it. I read a story to my twelve-year-old granddaughter a couple of months ago. She told me what was wrong: there were sentences that were not clear—and she was absolutely right. My husband is a good reader.

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INTERVIEWER

How do you know when a story is done?

PALEY

When I don't have anything else to say. Sometimes I publish the story in a magazine, and I still have something else to say. One story comes to mind: "Faith in the Afternoon." When it was published in a magazine it ended with Faith dreaming she was holding this guy's balls. All the guys I knew *loved* it. But when it came time to publish it in a book, I realized that wasn't what it was about; it would have been a cheap way to end it. I went beyond that. Everyone got mad at me—not really angry, just sad.

INTERVIEWER

How did you change it?

PALEY

I didn't *change* it. I simply realized that Faith was still in the park, and it was probably the late-sixties and one of the frequent little theatrical anti-war walks or parades would have to be coming through. Faith was able to have a political imagination as well as an erotic one.

INTERVIEWER

Is the character Faith, who appears in so many of your stories, at all autobiographical?

PALEY

No. Her life is entirely different from mine. I was never as mad at any husband of mine as she was at her first. On the other hand, I feel very warmly toward my present husband, and she does towards hers too. But I was never that mad. And I brought my kids up in different circumstances. Faith represents a number of women I have been close to. It's not as though she's *any one* of them—but she *has* become one of them. The whole Faith thing also came about partly by accident. In

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"The Used-Boy Raisers," I started off by giving Faith those two boys. Then to compensate for it I began giving all the other women daughters, but I was stuck with the major character of my stories having two boys from the beginning. I was also stuck with the name Faith, which I was very sorry for later on. It was too close to my own name, and I didn't really want it to be—but at the time I never thought I would write another story about her.

INTERVIEWER

The character must have some kind of hold on you, though, to keep turning up like that?

PALEY

She's become a very good worker for me.

INTERVIEWER

How do you know a story is working?

PALEY

I read it aloud a lot, and that helps me. It's not so useful for a writer of novels, but for me reading aloud as I work helps me know if it's right.

INTERVIEWER

What about a story like "Lavinia: An Old Story," written in a black voice—did you read that out loud as you wrote it?

PALEY

I did read it aloud. I don't know if I could write that story now. I was closer then to a couple of older black women as well as my own grandmother—whose story was exactly the same, which was one of my reasons for writing it. I was able to read the story to them—check it out in some way. There are other stories that may have been risky. These were recently read by some students

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in James Monroe High School in the Bronx where nearly all the kids were African-American. Not being in any political group yet—hopefully they will be—they weren't bothered by my writing "Lavinia: An Old Story" or "The Little Girl" at all. They argued a few particulars but were harder on the narrator than I was.

INTERVIEWER

What about people who criticize you for writing in a black voice?

PALEY

Some have been critical. I know the politics of it, but I know I act out of real feeling and considerable respect for the person. That's why I want to do it—not to show off. It's true that in "The Little Girl" I do have a pretty terrible black character—a rapist, in fact. It's not as though I only deal with sweet situations.

But what's a writer for? The whole point is to put yourself into other lives, other heads—writers have always done that. If you screw up, so someone will tell you, that's all. I think men can write about women and women can write about men. The whole point is to know the facts. Men have so often written about women without knowing the reality of their lives, and worse, without being interested in that daily reality.

INTERVIEWER

Are there any men you think write particularly well about women?

PALEY

I liked Norman Rush's last book, *Mating*. The main character is a very smart woman, very intellectual, very interesting, and very unlike many of the women many *women* write about. I love all the traditional books, but . . . well, I feel like many women that Anna Karenina shouldn't have killed herself. Still, Kate Chopin in *The*

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Awakening also has the woman go drown herself for no reason that I can see!

INTERVIEWER

Were you a poet first, before you started writing fiction?

PALEY

I wrote poems all my life. I didn't *really* write stories until I wrote my first book when I was in my thirties.

INTERVIEWER

You've spoken very specifically about the way a story comes to you. Is it different writing poetry? Is there more of an awareness or an adherence to craft?

PALEY

There's an equal amount of adherence to craft in the use of both forms. I would say that I went to school to study poetry, that's how I learned to write. I got my courage for the way I write stories from first writing poems. My poems of that period were more literary than the stories ever were, or than my poems are now. That was the difference.

INTERVIEWER

What was it like studying with Auden at the New School?

PALEY

He seemed an immortal to me. I had a conversation with him when I was seventeen, and though I only lived twenty blocks away, I never got to talk to him again that year—1939? 1940, probably. I couldn't understand a word he said. He had just come here, he had this lisp, plus his English—his normal way of speaking. He was giving a class on the history of English literature. At one point he said, "Are there any poets who would like to

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speak to me or who want me to look at their work?" There were 250 people in the room, and maybe five people put up their hands. I was one of them. Nowadays two hundred and forty would have raised their hands. That I even put my hand up was amazing to me, since I'd just gone through high school without raising it once. And then he said, "Meet me in Stewart's Cafeteria." So the next week, I went to meet him at Stewart's Cafeteria and he wasn't there. I immediately called up this boy I had begun to go around with (and later married) and bawled, "He wasn't there, he was fooling."

It turned out there were *two* Stewart's Cafeterias on Twenty-third Street—one east and one west—he was in the other one. So the next week he said, "Where were you, Grace Goodside?" Then I did meet him. He read my poems—which were exactly like his.

INTERVIEWER

Exactly?

PALEY

I mean, I really wrote in his style. I was crazy about him. I loved his poems so much that I was using this British language all the time—I was saying *trousers* and *subaltern* and things like that. You understand I was a Bronx kid. We went through a few poems, and he kept asking me, do you really *talk* like that? And I kept saying, "Oh yeah, well, sometimes." That was the great thing I learned from Auden: that you'd better talk your own language. Then I asked him what young writers now ask me—and I always tell them this story—I said to Auden, "Well, do you think I should keep writing?" He laughed and then became very solemn. "If you're a writer," he said, "you'll keep writing no matter what. That's not a question a writer should ask." Something like that, not exactly, but close.

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INTERVIEWER

Were there other poets that you heard or took a class with?

PALEY

No, but I read poetry all the time. Probably the poets everybody read then. Very catholic taste. I even loved Eliot then whom I later grew not to love. I knew lots of poems by memory and walked around mumbling them. Yeats, Rilke, Keats, Coleridge. I liked Milton a lot for some reason. And then there were the Oscar Williams anthologies of 1942 and 1943 with those pictures of the beautiful young poets.

INTERVIEWER

How about fiction writers?

PALEY

Again, you think you're unique in some way but you really never are: you read what people your age are reading. We read a lot of Joyce—*Dubliners* was always very important to me—and Proust. Joyce's stories were the only short stories I really liked. We used to read *Ulysses* aloud when I was eighteen years old. I think that's where I got my habit of reading aloud. Gertrude Stein's *Three Stories* impressed me. The use of the "other voice." Then there were lots of other novels at home that my parents were reading—like *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*—we worried, we felt for the Armenians. Later I read Chekhov, who meant a lot to me. Then Babel and Turgenev—all the Russians—and Flaubert. I don't think I read more than most good readers, but I read as much.

INTERVIEWER

Did you enjoy the Russian writers because you grew up with Russian at home?

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PALEY

Probably. Although it's not just Russian: Russian is very dear to me because it's a family language, but I am Jewish-Russian, which is a little different from Russian-Russian. My family ran away in 1905 from the Russian-Russians. People say I write like Isaac Babel, but it's not that he has influenced me. I hadn't read him before I wrote. It's our common grandparents who have influenced us both . . . in terms of inflection and what one pays attention to. It's not a literary influence so much as a social influence, a linguistic influence, a musical influence. I've just published a new book called *New and Collected Poems* with a blurb on the back from Jean Valentine, a wonderful poet. She says, "At last, a Russian writer in English!" The publishers felt it was a little weird, but I thought it was great.

INTERVIEWER

Has your writing been influenced by nonliterary media? Art, or music, or painting . . . TV?

PALEY

My husband, Robert Nichols, begins his day of writing by looking at paintings—for about an hour every morning. All this year he's been looking at Klee. I'm not like that. I've always listened to a lot of music, but I'm not very visual. Noticeably not. You may be aware that I don't do a lot of description. I've been surrounded by music for most of my life. Always classical. But I think the most powerful sounds are those *voices*, those childhood voices. The tune of those voices. Other languages, Russian and Yiddish, coming up smack against the English. I think you hear that a lot in American literature. TV I don't watch too much. I don't feel snobbish about it, it's just that it can use up too much time. It's terribly seductive.

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INTERVIEWER

People have described your writing as wise.

PALEY

That's because I'm old. When people get old they seem wise, but it's only because they've got a little more experience, that's all. I'm not so wise. Two things happen when you get older. You have more experience, so you either seem wiser, or you get totally foolish. There are only those two options. You choose one, probably the wrong one.

INTERVIEWER

In your choice of subject matter, you and Tillie Olsen have opened the door for a lot of writers.

PALEY

I hope so. Of course that's not up to me or Tillie to say, "Yes, there was the door and we opened it"—we can't say that. It's not nice. I will say I knew I wanted to write about women and children but I put it off for a couple of years because I thought, people will think this is trivial, nothing. Then I thought, it's what I *have* to write. It's what I want to read. And I don't see it out there.

Meanwhile the women's movement had begun to gather force. It needed to become the Second Wave. It turned out that we were some of the drops in the wave. Tillie was more like a cupful.

INTERVIEWER

Was there anyone on that wave before you, who enabled you to write like you did?

PALEY

Well, I didn't know I was on any wave. I knew what I was writing, but I didn't think then that I was part of any movement. I didn't even think I was a feminist! If you had asked me if I was a feminist when I began writing

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The Little Disturbances of Man, I would have said I'm a socialist—or something like that. But by the end of the book I had taught myself a lot and I knew more or less who I was. I opened the door to myself.

INTERVIEWER

Do you still feel supported by the women's movement?

PALEY

I do feel very supported. There's hardly a woman writer who doesn't receive some kind of support from the women's movement. We're very lucky to be living and writing now. I feel supported by lots of men too, but I feel very specifically the attention of women, even in opposition. And they're the ones I get arguments from; they're the ones who say, "Why don't you write about this kind of life, or that kind of life? We like the children but why are they all boys?" But on the other hand, I was at a conference in California last week, where a young woman kept saying she didn't want to be a woman writer because it trivialized her. The point is that the outside world will trivialize you for almost anything if it wants to. You may as well be who you are.

INTERVIEWER

Why do you suppose she said that?

PALEY

I think she said it because she feels it's true. And there *is* truth to it. A lot of European women feel it very strongly. They are afraid of being anything but totally universal. But we used to have a saying, I take it from whence it comes, which is a Bronx version of sticks and stones will break my bones, but names will never hurt me. So you take it from whence it comes, that is, if a certain society decides to trivialize you, it will marginalize you.

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INTERVIEWER

Do you think American women writers feel that way?

PALEY

I think they fear being marginalized and rightly so. There's an idea that there's this great mainstream, which may be wide but is kind of shallow and slow-moving. It's the tributaries that seem to have the energy.

INTERVIEWER

You've said that when you're writing you are "doing women's politics." Could you say more about that?

PALEY

Did I say that? If I did I probably meant that if the personal is political—as we all say—then writing about women is a political act. Just like black people writing about the lives of blacks. It's very important to people that they have these stories. And the personal is especially political when it spreads fingers out into the world—because sometimes you find that what is most personal is also what connects you most strongly with others.

INTERVIEWER

Has there been a change of climate from when you first started writing to now, in the nineties?

PALEY

In 1959 it was absolutely insane for Ken McCormick to say yes, he was going to publish a book of short stories. Now everybody in the writing world is reading and writing short stories—that's one thing. Another thing is that a lot more women are writing. A lot of people who wouldn't have written are writing. When a couple of black women speak, the throats of many are opened. Somehow or other they give courage and sound to their sisters.

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INTERVIEWER

So you didn't feel that sense of there being a community of women writers in the fifties?

PALEY

I didn't think about it. I just wrote. I didn't say, "Oh, there are no women writers," as much as I thought to myself, "this subject matter is so trivial. Who in the world would be interested in this stuff?"

INTERVIEWER

Did it surprise you when you found that there was a response, the sort of response that Ken McCormick had?

PALEY

I was surprised they published the book, I was surprised they liked the stories. It wasn't even really surprise—I just considered myself lucky.

INTERVIEWER

Do you feel that your subject matter has changed or broadened over the years?

PALEY

As my life has changed, it has, I suppose. I'm still politically very interested in women's lives, so I think about that a lot. But it really isn't up to me to say. Some of these observations other people have to make. I don't see a particular line, I just see that I've written a lot of stories. Yet I know they get different, somewhat, not a lot. I traveled, went to different places. I took an airplane out of the park.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think editors have a responsibility to publish as many women as they do men?

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PALEY

Yes. Editors should think about those things. What sometimes starts out seeming artificial, well, it's as though you *have* to be artificial at first. That's what affirmative action is about—it's hard for some people to evolve through artificiality into something natural and decent, a truth you and the world have refused to see. It's like changing your language.

INTERVIEWER

Can you tell when you pick up a manuscript whether it's a woman writer?

PALEY

You can't always tell. Think of the number of women who sent their manuscripts in with initials so they didn't give themselves away as women. I did that myself when I was young, I mean, with my poems. I'd write G.G. Paley.

INTERVIEWER

You put the initials on the poems because you thought they had a better chance of being accepted?

PALEY

It doesn't happen so much anymore but that's what used to happen: women hid in order to be seen.

INTERVIEWER

Some writers say writing gets harder.

PALEY

Well, some of it's harder and some of it's easier. The easy part is, you know you're going to finish something. That's the best part. When you first begin to write, you—well, I, at least, used to think, will I ever get past four paragraphs? But once I finished that first book I knew I would finish whatever I wanted to. That's the great thing.

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It's harder because you have already set yourself certain standards, and you're probably trying to do something more demanding—not to change your voice, but trying to understand something different, so far unknown to you.

INTERVIEWER

Your stories are so oriented around dialogue and how people sound. Have you ever written plays?

PALEY

For a start, plays always seemed to me much more than dialogue. A play that's all dialogue is really pretty uninteresting unless it's Shaw or Oscar Wilde. So that was one thing. Second of all, I don't like the theater as much as I did when I was really young. And third, when I was writing the early stories, the theater I liked was really the radical theater, street theater. I loved those audiences, and I really didn't like twenty-five-dollar-a-seat audiences, especially when they couldn't afford twelve dollars for a book! So I had a kind of a prejudice against it.

INTERVIEWER

You wrote your father into *Enormous Changes at the Last Minute* and you dedicated it to him. What about your mother?

PALEY

My mother died when I was young—in my early twenties. I was much closer to my father. My mother was very much like the person in a couple of the stories, in several poems: very serious, always telling my father not to think he's so funny. She was a terrific person, a very kind woman . . . but it's as though I haven't really wanted to write about her. I have some kind of loyalty to a true portrayal—can I do it? I think about her very factually. With my father I invent and reinvent him. He had many aspects. He could be the working guy in "The Loudest

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Voice," very charming, obviously not as principled as his wife; or he could be a man who writes poems or paints—he did most of the paintings in this kitchen. In actual fact he was a doctor, a neighborhood doctor who was much loved. He lived with my mother, my aunt and my grandmother. The joke was, if he said pass the salt, three women leaped to their feet—so he was a pain in that respect. My father had different aspects I could use, but my mother was very much one person, the same to everybody. She was wise, she didn't talk a lot. It was easier for me to leap onto the bandwagon of my father's conversation. In other words, I did the easy thing. I've been reprimanded for it by people who knew my mother—they ask me, where's mama?

INTERVIEWER

Virginia Woolf felt that a writer can't write if she's angry. What do you think about that?

PALEY

You can't write without a lot of pressure. Sometimes the pressure comes from anger, which then changes into a pressure to write. It's not so much a matter of getting distance as simply a translation. I felt a lot of pressure writing some of those stories about women. Writers are lucky because when they're angry, the anger—by habit almost—I wouldn't say transcends but *becomes* an acute pressure to write, to tell. Some guy, he's angry, he wants to take a poke at someone—or he kicks a can, or sets fire to the house, or hits his wife, or the wife smacks the kid. Then again, it's not always violent. Some people go out and run for three hours. Some people go shopping. The pressure from anger is an energy that can be violent or useful or useless. Also the pressure doesn't have to be anger. It could be love. One could be overcome with feelings of lifetime love or justice. Why not?

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INTERVIEWER

Other writers such as Toni Morrison and Flannery O'Connor use a lot of physical violence in their stories. In yours it's there, but offstage, in the background, in the past. Was this a conscious decision?

PALEY

I don't *use* violence. Most of the time it's used opportunistically. Still it is a terribly violent country. When I wrote "The Little Girl"—that story about the murder—it took all my strength . . . really used me from my toes to my head. It was so hard, it almost took my breath to write that story. I'm not as close to violence as African-American mothers who are writers, such as Toni Morrison or June Jordan. Having black sons who are vulnerable to police, to directed race hatred, they must be anxious all the time. Some of my stories are knock-wood stories—like "Samuel" in which four boys are fooling around on the subway between cars and one falls and is killed. It's a taboo story. I tell it to prevent it from happening, not because it did . . . the idea that if you write it into literature it won't happen in life.

But I hate the American expectation of violence. I'm not going to play into any of that. When I must write about violence, I will, but I'll do it straight, not add and add because the level is higher every year. I was just reading Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried,* and I felt the American war in Vietnam in my bones. Flannery O'Connor's a terrific writer, but somehow her conception of religion as specializing in death—and also her illness—forced her and her brilliant language in that direction.

INTERVIEWER

You say also that the pressure to write is a pressure of language—how do these two relate?

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PALEY

It depends. I wasn't angry when I wrote "Goodbye and Good Luck"—I just felt a certain pressure to use the resonance of the phrase "I was popular in certain circles"—a looking-backness, a storytelling justice for one of my aunts, a reinvention of her life for that purpose—all of which wouldn't leave me alone. The sound of it required me to go on. This is what I mean when I say that art comes from constant mental harassment. You're bugged.

INTERVIEWER

The pressure to write and the pressure to publish are not the same?

PALEY

Not for me. It's not that I don't like being published. I love to see my stuff in print. I really do. But I think I have a peculiar sense of time. I feel like I can always do something. There's time. I never feel like I have to do something fast or it will never appear, or I'll drop dead first. I may—I'm almost seventy. I figure, well, in a week I'll figure out where to send this to, and then I think, well, I'm too busy to decide.

INTERVIEWER

Have you ever had a hard time publishing?

PALEY

I've had a lot of trouble publishing my stories in magazines. People say that I'm a *New Yorker* writer: the *New Yorker* published one of my stories in 1978 and two in 1979 and has never published anything since. I often have stories sent back, though now I have more requests for more stories than I have stories to give, so it balances out. I know I can publish, but I still get things sent back.

INTERVIEWER

Have you ever relied on your writing for income?

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PALEY

No. I've always had to teach, or read, or lecture.

INTERVIEWER

What is the relationship between writing and money?

PALEY

It's helpful to have money. I don't think writers have to suffer to starve to death. One of the first things I tell my classes is, if you want to write, keep a low overhead. If you want to live expansively you're going to be in trouble because then you have to start thinking very hard about whom you're writing to, who your audience is, who the *editor* thinks your audience is, who he *wants* your audience to be?

INTERVIEWER

Did you always want to be a writer?

PALEY

I always wanted to write. Two different things. I never thought I was going to be a writer, but I was never interested in anything else. I failed at whatever else I undertook—even as an office worker, I was not outstanding.

INTERVIEWER

You've said there are two kinds of people: those with children and those without. Could you say more about that?

PALEY

It's a different life. Another creature is really dependent on you. I think it's *good* for a writer, though. I know some people say women writers should not have children. Of course, it was worse for them back then. Years ago just to do the kids' wash could take the whole day, so if you were poor it was impossible to write. If you

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were rich you could hire a maid; it was possible if you were George Sand. But even now we need help. My kids were in day-care from the time they were three years old.

INTERVIEWER

How did you find time to write while raising children, being involved in political activity, teaching?

PALEY

I wrote at different paces. I wrote my first stories when I was sick and had a few weeks at home. I made a start in a big chunk of time, about three weeks. And after that I just kept going.

Sometimes one or the other part of my life would pull me away from writing—the children of course and then the civil rights movement and the Vietnam war. Having grown up the way I did, it just seemed natural to become involved. That was what the whole country was about. I was often busy with that from morning until night. I couldn't stand that we were in this war, and I just wrote less. Actually, that isn't quite true. I wrote leaflets, political reports, articles. And poems. As a matter of fact, my reports following my journey through North Vietnam in 1969 were mostly poems.

A lot of other writers were involved too. There were lots of readings. On the East Coast, Denise Levertov and Mitch Goodman had a lot to do with those events. Angry Arts Week—organized by Artists against the War—and the Greenwich Village Peace Center are good examples of that energy. Poets rode around the city reading from trucks. Almost any concert that week would begin with a dedication to the war's end. One particular event—"Vietnamese Life"—focused on ordinary Vietnamese life and culture. No egotism allowed, no "Oh how bad I feel about all of this. . . ." I remember Hortense Calisher reading Vietnamese stories and Susan Sontag reading Lao Tse. Irene Fornes presented a Vietnamese wedding. Wally Zuckerman, who used to build harpsichords, cre-

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ated the wind instruments used in the windy forest of Indochina.

INTERVIEWER

Who were the poets on the trucks?

PALEY

People who were comfortable on trucks. I wasn't. I worked in the office mostly. I was too shy anyway. Who were they? Well, Sam Abrams, Tuli Kupferberg, Clayton Eshleman, Bob Nichols, Ed Sanders, many more. I've probably got a file somewhere.

INTERVIEWER

How important do you think it is for the writer to rise up at moments like that?

PALEY

It's interesting for the writer. It's normal. Of course, it's hard if you're in the middle of a book. It's a question only Americans ask. Is it good? It certainly isn't antithetical to a passionate interior life—all that noise coming in. You *have* to make music of it somehow.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think political statements belong in literature? Would you write a novel that was a political tract?

PALEY

One man's political tract is another person's presidential statement—in Czechoslovakia, for example. The word *tract* is such a bad word by itself obviously one would have to say, "No, nobody should write a tract, nobody should do that." But I think that a love of language, truthfulness and a sense of form is justification enough.

Anyway characters in fiction can say anything they want. They're often quite willful, you know.

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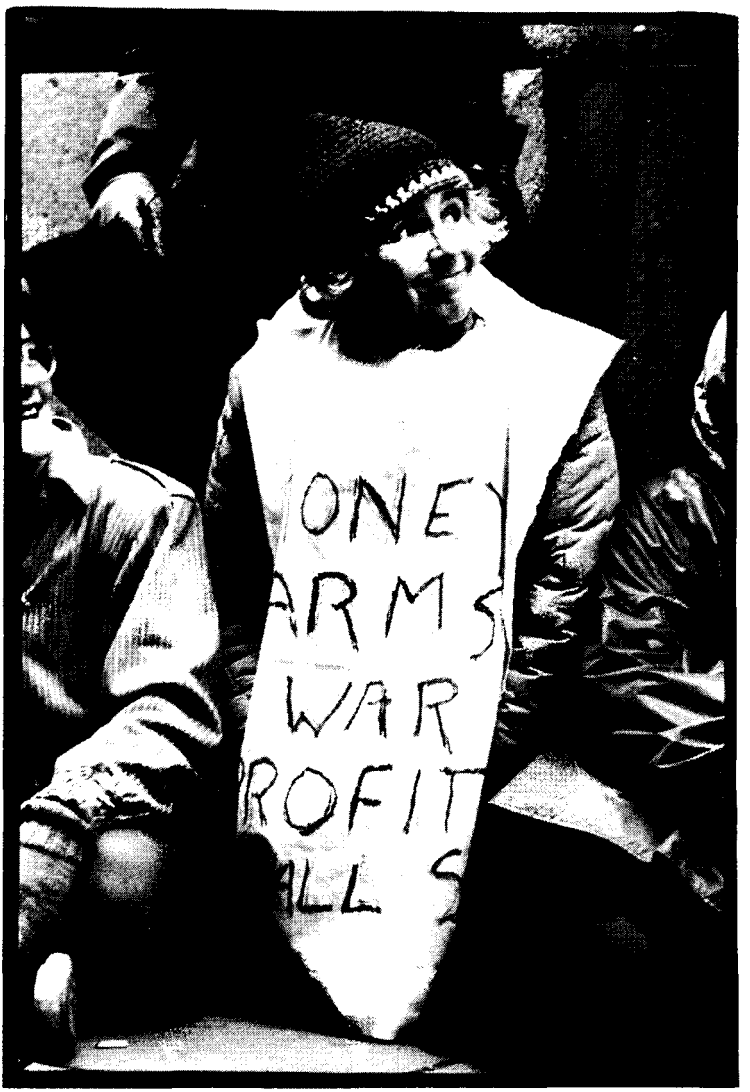
INTERVIEWER

Has anti-Semitism affected your career?

PALEY

I don't know. It's affected my work. I take being Jewish very seriously. I like it. My first two stories were specifi-



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Grace Paley at a peace rally in 1984.

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cally Jewish. When I took a class at the New School this teacher said to me, you've got to get off that Jewish *dime*, Grace, they're wonderful stories, but . . . . The idiocy of that remark was that he was telling me this just as Saul Bellow, Philip Roth and others were getting more generally famous everyday. He was Jewish himself, but he wanted me to "broaden" myself.

I don't think anti-Semitism has affected my career much. I'm sure in certain colleges they're not interested in my stories, but you'd be surprised how people don't take it into account. Kids especially, they just want to know how the plot turned out. I always say that racism is like pneumonia and anti-Semitism is like the common cold—everybody has it. I often meet it in this lovely Vermont countryside, sneezing away.

INTERVIEWER

You used to embrace the position of literary outsider, whereas now you are a central figure. . . .

PALEY

I wasn't trying to be an outsider. At first I was afraid of hanging out with writers. Otherwise I would surely have seen and tried to talk to Auden again. But I really wasn't interested. When the poets went out on the trucks, I helped organize, but I never read myself. Nor was I in any of those Vietnam anthologies . . . until about six months ago when a group of nurses put an anthology together of women who had gone to Vietnam during the war. Basically I didn't want to get into that life . . . I was scared of it.

INTERVIEWER

What were you scared of?

PALEY

I was scared in the way that some people are scared to leave their neighborhoods: you have your people, you have your roots and you don't want to pull away from

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them. You're writing about these people and their lives and you don't want suddenly to get into a literary scene. It seemed so logical to me. Besides, I wasn't interested. I was interested in my Park friends. I was interested in the meetings I helped organize during those years or in going to the Soviet Union to do certain political tasks, to Sweden to talk to deserters, to Vietnam in 1969.

Though I devoted a good deal of time trying to be completely unliterary, I ended up working with writers on the PEN board and liking them, and it. Also having many beloved literary friends like Kay Boyle and Tillie Olsen, Esther Broner. Don Barthelme lived across the street—he was a beloved family friend. And my second husband is a writer. I was always afraid that if I started to become too literary it would end my street and kitchen life. But it turned out writers were okay. I was surprised. And then my closest friends like Sybil Claiborne, Eva Kollisch and Vera Williams had always been writing—so there was no escape.

INTERVIEWER

Have you ever found yourself in conflict with the literary establishment?

PALEY

There are so many different groups of writers. Some liked the first book and didn't like what came after that, but I think it's really *me* they didn't like so much. As I became more feminist some people took a dim view of that. On the other hand other people liked me, not for the stories but for the stuff I did outside. I haven't really seen a lot of criticism of my work; I know it exists and I know it's good and bad, but I don't go out and look for it. The longest review I've ever had was an attack in *Commentary* magazine. Kind of virulent. My publisher doesn't send me terrible things that people have said. I'm not the kind of a writer who gets into literary fights. I prefer political ones. As for my attitude towards other writers, I'm kind of short on disdain or contempt. That

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is, I don't belong to the school of "I can only live if you die." I tend to be interested in writers whose work is different from mine. Of course I'm saddened and angered equally by work made of contempt, hatred, misogyny and too many adjectives.

INTERVIEWER

At a recent PEN Congress in which you played a prominent role there was much argument over the proper relationship between the writer and the state. Is it necessarily an adversarial one?

PALEY

It's not that you *set out* to oppose authority. In the act of writing you simply do. Your job, your reason for writing, is to uncover what the state and the conventions of your town normally hide. That's why you want to write—to tell what hasn't been told. Our PEN Congress was about the conscience of the State and the conscience of the writer. One of its troubles and truths was that George Schultz, intent on making war on Central American people, was the keynote speaker. Another was the fact that out of eleven poets reading, ten were men. This situation has been eased somewhat by the creation of a Women's Committee in the U.S. as well as one in International PEN.

INTERVIEWER

And a final word?

PALEY

The best training is to read and write, no matter what. Don't live with a lover or roommate who doesn't respect your work. Don't lie, buy time, borrow to buy time. Write what will stop your breath if you don't write.

—Jonathan Dee
Barbara Jones
Larissa MacFarquhar

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The Cat Inside

William S. Burroughs

Animal contact can alter what Castaneda calls "assemblage points." Like mother-love. It's been slobbered over by Hollywood. Andy Hardy goes down on his knees by his mother's bed. What's wrong with that? A decent American kid praying for his mother. What's wrong with that?

"I'll tell you what's wrong with it, B.J. It's shit. It's dead mawkish muck and it destroys the truth under it."

Here is a mother hooded seal on an ice floe with her cub. Thirty-mile-an-hour winds, thirty degrees below zero. Look into her eyes, slitted, yellow, fierce, crazed, sad and hopeless. End line of a doomed planet. She can't lie to herself, she can't pull any pathetic rags of verbal self-glorification about her. There she is, on this ice floe with her cub. She shifts her five-hundred-pound bulk to make a dug available. There's a cub with its shoulder ripped open by one of the adult males. Probably won't make it. They all have to swim to Denmark, fifteen hundred miles away. Why? The seals don't know why. They have to get to Denmark. They all have to get to Denmark.

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Two Poems by Marilyn Hacker

Street Scenes II

After lunch, the Sunday strollers boil
on the pavement, two miles from Belleville,
which may be the upcoming *quartier*
now that fashion's priced out the Marais.
Stretch-silk jeans, antiqued American
patchwork quilts (hand-sewn, but in Taiwan)
rag-doll black girls and rag-doll Uncle Sams
are sold in what still was the Hammam
Saint-Paul last year. There, Jewish matrons, girt
with goosefat, had their nails done, had dessert
and some discreet attention to their hair,
had tea and time to gossip in lounge chairs
on steaming tiles beside the pool, or nap.
There, granddaughters and foreigners swam laps,
sweated, were flogged with twigs, were rubbed and
rolled
over, kneaded and pummelled, doused with cold
water, to join them, panting, on the tiles,
or risk the verdict of the eight-foot scales.
The Jewish matrons were Tunisian
Jews. The French Jews mostly disappeared
in forty-two: the Vélodrome d'Hiver,
Beaune-la-Rolande, Drancy, then the trains.
Their street is being frosted to a myth.
The cowboy-boot boutique rubs doorsills with
a new shop selling Yemenite cassettes
and hand-painted Israeli seder plates.
Ben-Simon the butcher co-exists
with an architectural palimpsest
of doors and windows: heavy oak and brass
four hundred years old, filigree and glass
of the last *fin de siècle,* fresh concrete

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pavement of this one, widening the street
so international pedestrians
can loiter. Re-dispersed Jews seeking roots,
they price the impossible purple snakeskin boots
and queue for lunch at the falafel stands
with sallow cousins in ageless black coats.

Dusk: July

Late afternoon rain of a postponed summer:
wet streets, wet slate roofs, swish of tires, wet
awnings,
pin-curled neighbor leaning out on her wrought-iron
window-guard, smoking,

wet chestnuts, wet lavender by the river's
shades of gray-green. This over-subtle season
will not burst, all clarity, into sunlight.
Petal by petal,

tiger-lilies open up in a pitcher,
orange, yellow, stars or beast-faces yawning.
Leaves like feast-day offerings round an altar
drop on the carpet.

I would love my love, but my love is elsewhere.
I would take a walk with her in the evening's
milky pearl. I'd sleep with my arms around her
confident body,

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arms and legs asprawl like an adolescent.
We're not adolescents. Our friends are dying
and between us nothing at all is settled
except our loving.

We've loved other bodies the years have altered:
knuckles swollen, skin slackened, eyelids grainy;
bodies that have gone back to earth, the synapse
of conscience broken.

Softly, softly, speak of it, but say something.
We are middle-aged and our friends are dying.
What do we lie down beside when we lie down
alone, together?

If I could remember the names, the places,
rooms and faces, gestures and conversations,
I'd have some excuse for the years passed through me
like air, like water:

school friends who turned into suburban matrons;
bar friends, one-night-stands, who are dead of
    AIDS, or
tenured, or in jail, or suburban matrons;
great-aunts, grandparents

of whom I had nothing to tell my daughter.
Those dead Jews on both sides of the Atlantic
disappear again as the year two thousand
washes us under.

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Seize the days, the days, or the years will seize them,
leaving just the blink of a burnt-out lightbulb
with a shard of filament left inside that
ticks when it's shaken.

Fix the days in words and the years will seize them
anyway: a bracket of dates, an out-of-
print book, story nobody told, rooms locked and
phone disconnected,

cemetery no one will ever visit.
Who knows where my grandparents' graves are? Who
cut
through the gauze unveiling my mother's tombstone?
I don't. I didn't.

Light is still alive in the table-lamp I
switch on in the nine o'clock twilight; music
still alive in street noise; mine one more shadow
drawing the curtains.

I just want to wake up beside my love who
wakes beside me. One of us will die sooner;
one of us is going to outlive the other,
but we're alive now.

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Ten Poems by Zbigniew Herbert

Speculations on the Subject of Barabbas

What happened to Barabbas. I ask no one knows
Released from the chain he walked out into a white
street
he could turn right go straight ahead turn left
spin on his heels crow happily as a rooster
He Emperor of his own hands and head
He Governor of his own breath

I ask because in a sense I took part in the affair
Attracted by the crowd in front of Pilate's palace I
shouted
like the others Barabbas let Barabbas free
Everyone shouted if I alone had been silent
it still would have happened as it was supposed to
happen

Perhaps Barabbas returned to his band
In the mountains he kills quickly robs with precision
Or he opened a pottery shop
And cleans hands soiled by crimes
in the clay of creation
He is a water carrier mule driver money lender
a ship owner—Paul sailed to the Corinthians on one
of them
or—this can't be ruled out—
became a prized spy paid by the Romans

Look and admire the stunning game of fate
for chances of power smiles of fortune

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While the Nazarene
remained alone
without an alternative
with a steep
path
of blood

Old Prometheus

He writes his memoirs. He is trying to explain the place of the hero in a system of necessities, to reconcile the notions of existence and fate that contradict one another.

Fire is crackling gaily in the fireplace, in the kitchen his wife bustles about—an exalted girl who did not bear him a son but comforts herself she will pass into history anyway. Preparations for supper: the local parson is coming, and the pharmacist, now the closest friend of Prometheus.

The fire blazes up. On the wall, a stuffed eagle and a letter of gratitude from the tyrant of the Caucasus, who thanks to Prometheus' discovery succeeded in burning down a town in revolt.

Prometheus laughs quietly. Now it is his only way of expressing his disagreement with the world.

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Those Who Lost

Those who lost dance with bells at their legs
in fetters of comic costumes in the feathers of a
croaked eagle
dust of compassion flies over the small square
as a cinematic carbine shoots gently and accurately

they lift an ax of tin with a bow light as an eyebrow
they murder leaves and shadows
and only the drum booms recalling ancient pride and
wrath

they abandoned history and entered the laziness of a
display case
they lie in a glass tomb next to faithful stones

those who lost—they are vendors next to the
Governor's palace in Santa Fe
(a long one-story building of warm scorched dark
ochre
columns of wood jutting beams of a ceiling where a
sharp shadow is hanging)
they sell beads amulets of the god of rain and fire a
miniature of the temple of Kiva
with two straws of a ladder pointing up where the
harvest descends

buy the god echo it is cheap and expressively silent
as it hesitates on a hand stretched out to us
from the stone age

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Wit Stwosz: Madonna Falling Asleep

Like tents before a storm golden cloaks ripple
a flood of hot scarlet exposes chests and feet
cedar apostles raise their huge heads
a beard dark as an axe hangs from the heights

The woodcarvers' fingers blossom. The miracle slips
from their hands
so they put them in the air—the air becomes stormy
as chords
Stars dim in the sky music also comes from the stars
but doesn't reach the earth it remains high as the
moon

And Mary falls asleep. She goes to the bottom of
astonishment
loving eyes hold her in the frail net of the retina
she falls higher and higher filters through fingers like
a stream
and they bend with difficulty over the mounting cloud

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Mr. Cogito and Pure Thought

Mr. Cogito tries
to attain pure thought
at least before sleep

but the attempt
carries the seeds of its own defeat

as he arrives
at the state when thought is like water
vast and pure water
at an indifferent shore

the water suddenly ruffles over
and a wave brings
tin cans
driftwood
a tuft of hair

to tell the truth Mr. Cogito
is not completely without fault
he was unable to detach
his inner eye
from the mailbox
the smell of the sea was in his nostrils
crickets tickled his ear
and he felt her absent fingers under his ribs

he was ordinary like everyone else
with furnished thoughts
the hand's skin on the back of a chair
a furrow of tenderness
on a cheek

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sometime
sometime later
when he grows cold
he will reach the state of satori

and be as the masters recommend
empty and
amazing

Late Autumnal Poem of Mr. Cogito Destined for Women's Magazines

The time of apples falling leaves still put up a defense
in the morning heavier and heavier fog the air grows
bald
last grains of honey first reds of the maples
a fox killed on a field space reverberating with the
shots

apples will go underground trunks come up to the
eyes
leaves will be stored in chests and the wood speak
now we can distinctly hear the planets as they move
a high moon rises accept the glaze over your eyes

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About Mr. Cogito's Two Legs

The left leg normal
one could say optimistic
a little too short
boyish
with exuberant muscles
and a well-shaped calf

the right leg
God help us—
thin
with two scars
one along the Achilles tendon
the other oval
pale pink
shameful reminder of an escape

the left
inclined to leap
ready to dance
loving life too much
to expose itself

the right
nobly rigid
sneering at danger

in this way
on two legs
the left which can be compared to Sancho Panza
and the right

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recalling the wandering knight
Mr. Cogito
goes
through the world
staggering slightly

Mr. Cogito and the Pearl

Sometimes Mr. Cogito recalls, not without emotion, his youthful attempts at perfection, those juvenile *per aspera ad astra.* One day a small pebble happened to fall inside his shoe as he was hurrying to classes. It maliciously worked its way between raw flesh and his sock. Common sense suggested that he get rid of the intruder, but the principle of *amor fati* demanded on the contrary that he endure it. He chose the second, heroic solution.

In the beginning it didn't seem dangerous, a nuisance and nothing more. But after a while the heel appeared in his field of consciousness—it was at the moment when the young Cogito was trying to grasp with great effort what the professor was saying on the theme of Plato's concept of ideas. The heel grew, swelled, pulsated, from pale pink it became scarlet red like a setting sun, and pushed out of his head not only Plato's idea but all other ideas as well.

In the evening before going to bed he emptied the foreign body from his sock. It was a small, cold, yellow grain of sand. The heel on the contrary was large, burning, and dark with pain.

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Mr. Cogito Encounters a Statuette of the Great Mother in the Louvre

This small cosmology of burnt clay
a little larger than the hand comes from Boeotia
on top a head like the holy mountain of Meru
from which hair flows—great rivers of the earth
the neck is the sky pulsating with warmth
sleepless constellations
a necklace of clouds

send us holy water of harvests
you with leaves growing from your fingers
we who are born of clay
like the ibis snake and grass
we want you to hold us
in your strong palms

on her belly the square earth
guarded by a double sun

we don't want other gods our fragile house of air
a stone a tree simple names of things are enough
carry us carefully from night to night
then blow out our senses at the threshold of the
question

in a glass case the deserted Mother
looks with the surprised eye of a star

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Mr. Cogito Looks at His Face in the Mirror

Who wrote our faces certainly chicken pox
marking its "o" with a calligraphic pen
but who gave me the double chin
which glutton when all my soul
yearned for asceticism why are the eyes
set so close after all it was he not me
who strained his eyes in the underbrush for the
invasion of the Venedas

ears protruding too far two shells of skin
probably a legacy from an ancestor who caught the
echo
of a rumbling procession of mammoths over the
steppe

the forehead not too high very few thoughts
—women gold earth don't let yourself be knocked
from the horse
the prince thought for them and wind carried them
on the roads
they tore at walls with their fingers and suddenly with
a great cry
fell into emptiness in order to return in me

and yet I bought in salons
powders ointments mixtures
rouge for nobility
I applied the marble greenness of Veronese to my
eyes
steeped my ears in Mozart
perfected my nostrils with the fragrance of old
books

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in front of the mirror the inherited face
old meats fermenting in a bag
passions and medieval sins
paleolithic hunger and fear
the apple falls next to the apple tree
the body linked to the chain of species

this is how I lost the tournament with my face

—translated from the Polish
by John and Bogdana Carpenter

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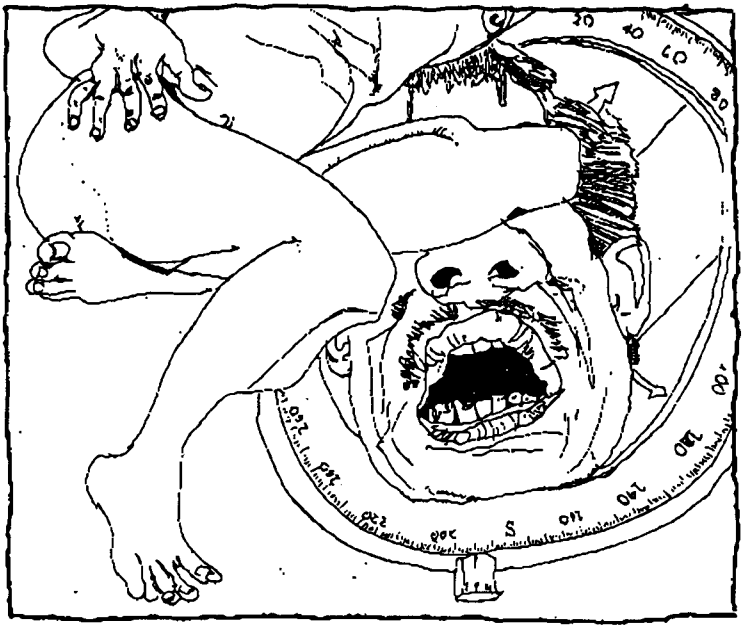
ThEGhoStof MagNEtism



William T. Vollmann

After running full speed through the green segment of your route, you reach a point where you realize that more care is needed. An imaginary yellow light is flashing and demands that you make more exact use of the Orienteering skills you have learned. It is a matter of locating and passing all the checkpoints you have on your map that lead you in the right direction.

—*Bjorn Kjellstrom*
Be Expert with Map and Compass

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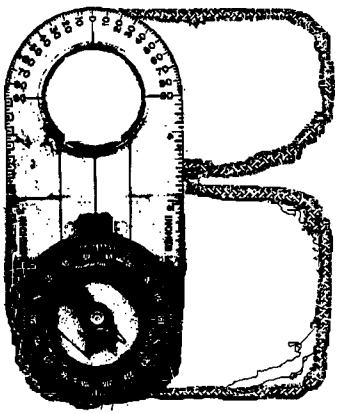
TREMBLINGS OF THE NEEDLE



efore I had even gone away, I started polishing San Francisco as if it were a pair of glasses to look through and every *new* thing dust and dandruff; so the day of the farewell party gleamed and curved the world to the degree required by my nearsightedness: I remember the breeze as we stood on the deck of the ferry; hot sun on faces, shoulders and railings; my friends with their coolers and picnic baskets; and the bay all around and everything perfect (which is to say ready-polished), Margaret smiling (she had arranged this ocean occasion as a surprise), and the greenness of Angel Island just ahead with people playing Frisbee and the good smells of barbecue coming over the water; while I stood so happy to be with my friends, wondering who else might already be waiting on Angel Island as part of the surprise. As I looked into their faces, they seemed to me so dearly lovable—in part, I think, on account of the effort and expense that they had gone to for me, which proved that they cared about me; but I like to think that had I provided the party for them it would have been the same; I was already burnishing them so delicately that their very failings had become endearing. —Beside me stood Martin in the sunlight, squinting and holding onto the railing with both hands. Too often I had considered him spineless, insipid, unintelligent. When he spoke it was difficult to pay attention to him, for he stuttered and rambled. But today he seemed to me submissive like Christ, with a gentle, timid childishness that needed to be loved and protected. How could I forget the journeys that he and I had taken together, the midnights when we had driven home through the Central Valley, when it was warm and

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the sky was greenish gray, the fields grayish black; and through the open window of the truck came the smell of alfalfa? We saw cars (very few, very late) and white road dots gleamed in our headlights, and we played good old songs over and over in the cassette player and for hours our neighbor was the humid presence of fields. Now on the ferry he was quiet, for large groups intimidated him. I remembered ascending the steep gorges of dry mountains ten years before and being desperately thirsty, my lips grainy with blood and salt, and finding Martin at last and asking for water, Martin taking off his pack so patiently and handing his canteen to me, and the goodness and sweetness of that water. —Chubby Monique sat behind us, letting the wind flutter her sweatshirt, laughing and hugging her lover, Vera, whose narrow little face had sometimes been for me a banner of boredom, but which today suggested serenity. How limited I had been, that I had not always seen her that way! As for Monique, her laughter opened up her face in an unaffected way, and I suddenly understood that what I had sometimes mistaken in her for rudeness or selfishness was nothing less than honesty. I had never known Monique and Vera well, it occurred to me now, but I recalled the time when we had gone out to dinner together at some vegetarian Chinese place or other in Richmond and I took a liking to them both because from appetizer to dessert they behaved as purely as butter virgins, feeding each other with the same spoon, nourishing each other with Calistoga water; then I felt a sharp pang as though I were excluded from something, and I longed to see them at home, where among the plump, hard pillows of their futon, or condensing on the dark-lobed underleaves of their many houseplants, their innermost tendernesses must live, freshened by a thousand kisses, guarded and protected by the horned ram skulls that hung on the walls; and although I could never see this, it made me inexpressibly grateful that I might at least know of it; and the pang I felt, of loneliness or jealousy, was not unpleas-

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ing, because I imagined that these two and their love would at least dwell *near* me forever, increasing luxuriously like every other good thing. But presently Monique began complaining of not feeling well, and at dessert she scarcely opened her mouth when Vera lifted the spoon to her, but sat there drooping. —Baby, did you forget your pills again? said Vera. The other woman nodded miserably. Then she groaned, and pitched forward into her plate. —Vera cried out and half rose in her chair and said goddamn, oh why did this have to happen again? She was wringing her hands, and her face was very shiny with tears. I looked around me for the waiter, and saw that everyone in the restaurant had gathered around us staring with big spooky eyes like the cows in the south field would do when Martin and I had butchered a steer and the blood ran across the concrete floor of the slaughterhouse and through the corner drainpipe, sinking into the soft alfalfa of the south field, sinking, sinking underground to swell that dark black river of blood that must run beneath the Sierras and through the sewers of Sacramento and probably all the way to San Francisco, but first the other cows smelled it and gathered around the slaughterhouse, staring with black-masked eyes from whitish faces in the hot twilight, staring at the trickling blood, at Martin and me—and Vera and I wiped the milky, sticky dessert rice out of Monique's face with a wet napkin; we left some money on the table, and then Vera slung her friend over her shoulder and carried her out to the car; she did not want me to help. The will-less arms and legs swung hideously; the Volkswagen shuddered home, stalling at almost every intersection. I sat with the unconscious girl in the backseat. Neither Vera nor myself said a word. When we turned down the hill onto Mars Street, with the lights of San Francisco below us and then the soothing darkness of the bay and the dense low ridge of lights that was Berkeley, Monique's eyes snapped open and then she closed them again, sighing and shaking her head and

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grinding her face in my lap, and I said how bad do you feel Monique? and Vera had turned off the ignition and was saying take it easy honey we're home now I'll put you to bed, and I lifted Monique's head as slowly as I could, but she had become still paler and her face and hands were sweaty and she said I'm going to be sick,

so Vera rushed to open the door for her and carried her out and said I'm with you darling I'm holding you,

and she laid her gently down where the grass was softest and knelt beside her and raised her head up into her lap, stroking her temples with such love and gentleness, and Monique began to retch and Vera was kissing her head all over and saying that's a good doll that's *right I'm here with you I won't let anything bad happen* to you so go ahead and let it come out you'll feel better,

but Monique started moaning no no, and she pulled away from Vera and sat up rigid and trembling with her eyes starting from her head and I heard a gulping noise deep in her throat and she was struggling feebly with her little hands to push Vera away and Vera said to me or herself shit here she goes again this is the part I hate the worst and Monique whispered *don't touch me I'm the Ghost of Magnetism!* and I thought what the *hell,* and I heard her teeth chattering and she said no don't spin me but Vera only said come on honey you can't feel better till you throw up and Monique wailed what have I *done* to you that you're trying to make me—oh!— and she slumped in Vera's arms and Vera explained to me you see she *hates* to throw up, and I said ah, and I said but what does she mean exactly by the Ghost of Magnetism? and Vera said distractedly

it's not *her* it's Elaine Suicide, and I said what about her? and Vera ran her hands through her hair and said

oh God that girl cracks me up she just *slays* me I wonder if she learned to talk like that at her rebirthing class . . . but I knew that Vera was not telling me the truth, that this was some secret between her and Monique which their skulls and houseplants guarded like

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a rain forest's mystery; as for Elaine Suicide, whom I knew well, she had never to my knowledge taken a rebirthing class; nor had she confessed to any kinship with the eighteenth-century French physicists who played the compass false for the greater good; anyhow, Monique finally threw up and felt better. Now she and her lover were happy and laughing on the ferry, and I did not want to leave them and never see their Volkswagen again, whose windows were precariously held on with duct tape; I wanted to keep knowing them whether they laughed or cried, but even if I had been the Grand Demon of Magnetism at the center of the compass dial I would *still* have to vomit them up, along with the sweet water that Martin gave me, because I was leaving. —It was the same with all the others, who were spending the day with me for the last time, making a constellation of remembrance for me that I could not keep in my sky, no matter how much I wanted to, and they did not have and never had had any faults: —neither Margaret, who had never complained when I turned the stereo up loud, nor earnest Paul and Nancy who sat together as quiet as Quakers and left early, nor Elaine Suicide who lay sulking prettily in the sun as she had done at the beach when I drew sketches of her naked; nor old Laddie the hobo, who was more lovingly patient than Santa Claus (when he was not drunk); once when he and Elaine and I were coming back from the beach and Elaine had to drive round and round the block looking for parking until she was close to tears, Laddie simply beamed and said well, how *nice* that we get to look at the view! Elaine, I sure hope you don't run out of gas! —yessir, Laddie was as perfect a being as Sharie the pathologist who let me eat all her ice cream or Painter Ben who had invited me to Thanksgiving dinner every year, because he was once lonely himself and so at holidays he had all the losers like me over for Thanksgiving, but I never went, preferring to get depressed alone over cheap and watery food in my chilly flat (although of course I was *never* as depressed as

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Elaine Suicide) and I wished now as I stood behind Ben on the ferry that I had come over more often to watch football on Sundays, that I had been at all his grand dinners (Vera and Monique always came) —as if I could *collect* them somehow in an album of imperishability, in which I could always see Ben's kitchen table where I used to sit down with him over spaghetti piled with the bright red meat sauce that he made by the quart and stored in the freezer along with packages of frozen spinach and squash puree, and the phone rang for Ben and the phone rang for Ben and I ate spaghetti to my heart's content; even Elaine, who seldom agreed with people, did not hesitate to say that when you ate at Painter Ben's house there was always more than enough to eat, which was both good and necessary as I had learned since Ben had once gone camping for six weeks with me and lost fifteen pounds on my food, which is why he now had another helping; and the phone rang for Ben and Ben said *that* one wanted me to take her climbing with me! and I said what did you tell her? and Ben grinned and said I told her no, and I said she bores you? and Ben said *sex* bores me more and more, and I said Ben you can jerk off to my girlfriend's picture anytime you want, and Ben said I only jerk off to hundred dollar bills, and the phone rang for Ben; after dinner he'd lead me down into his basement where everything smelled of paint and Ben said these paint-fume chemicals must sure be fucking me up but you know what? *I* don't care, because I don't *want* to be normal! and upstairs the phone rang for Ben and we played around at marbleizing and stippling his paints on practice squares of masonite because there was *money* to be made in such projects, as evinced by the subtly marbled walls of the beauty parlor on Polk Street where the Handcuff Queen served you wine as she permed you; so Painter Ben, who made money because he bid high with calm conviction and worked very fast, had learned to make masonite look like agate or jasper or tiger's eye; he could turn a piece

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of cardboard into a vanilla tombstone; he could marbleize any rich bitch's fireplace into translucent mauve and porphyry and he was so handsome with his moustache, his iridescent blue-green eyes, his outdoor face whose cheeks creased widely whenever he smiled, that women were always calling his answering machine; yes indeed, in his way Painter Ben was perfect, like weather-beaten blonde Megan, who had once been the beauty queen of Georgia, whom I had a crush on, so one very cold New Year's Eve in Berkeley I was doing everything I could to get Megan to go to bed with me—like a magnetic flux line desiring to encircle the sweetest electric current, and my friend Seth wished me luck and Megan spent hours cleaning her room and primping herself for her great date with me and my heart pounded *ba*-BOOM! *ba*-BOOM! with excitement at the thought that I would most certainly screw Megan, who had just graduated with honors from her safe-sex seminar; and like all generals on the eve of victory I reflected on my long and cunning campaign of love notes to Megan hidden in the closets, in the bathroom behind the toilet-paper roll, in the kitchen under the nutmeg jar, to say nothing of love notes boldly written, summer and winter on the bulletin board or even on the back of Megan's junk mail—but always, it must be said, plotted and thrillingly accomplished when I was visiting Seth, and Megan was out so that Megan would be surprised; and Megan had laughed and kissed me and her hair smelled like all the flowers of Georgia; therefore, as Seth and I strolled across the Berkeley campus that night passing the time by singing "Helplessly Hoping" and inspecting leaves and trees while Megan made herself perfect for me, I slammed my fist into my palm and said Seth I've *got* her I *know* I do!

and Seth said sincerely that would be *so wonderful!*

and Seth said look at this pinnate leaf structure, and Seth said Megan must really be smitten she's working so hard to fix herself up, and I said I can hardly wait!

and the globe lights shone hopefully through all the

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pinnate leaves even as we went jogging valiantly home where we heard the hair dryer purring Megan's promise and Megan called from the bathroom almost ready guys and Seth nudged me with his bony elbow and winked, right as Megan came out, and she was so beautiful and Seth grinned and said see you later pal, and I said oh Megan, and hugged her and buttoned up her coat for her and took her hand and we went running, running, with the New Year's Eve darkness stinging and refreshing our foreheads, and Megan was laughing and I thought soon I will be kissing this lovely face (a privilege which in fact she was to refuse me over white wine in the Thai restaurant as I sat looking into her eyes thinking well *that's* a fine how-d'you-do which translates into *now* what do we do? —even though we did have fun just the same, skipping hand in hand down Shattuck Avenue at midnight singing "What Did the Deep Sea Say?" at the top of our voices so that everyone stared at us) and when we got back to Megan's house she turned on the space heater; sitting beside her close enough to touch her cheek if that had been granted me I said well if you won't let me *sleep* with you can I at least *kiss* you? and Megan said no and I said well if you won't let me *kiss* you can I *hold your hand?* and Megan smiling said you know, I don't believe you can! and I said well all right and went upstairs to Seth's absent sister's hard cold bed on which I sat all night, the better to stare sulkily down at the floor immediately beneath which my former beauty queen was even at that moment (I presumed) sleeping happily alone with her face glowing pink in the light of her space heater and her hair radiating away from her in every direction to instruct her lucky pillows in all the directions; I felt so heartsore and anguished and sorry for myself that I never even lay down although I certainly longed for morphines and semi-morphines to close my swollen eyes but the next day was next year and it was bright and sunny and cold and I felt deliciously debauched with grief as Seth and I drove up the coast

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singing "Chalk up Another One, Another Broken Heart" and walked in the woods chewing tree sap and we astounded Seth's father with the vampire-blood capsules that Megan had given me last night for a present and I was as happy as could be; Megan was perfect, even if I never saw her again (for you must not imagine that all these friends of mine came to Margaret's surprise party or were even invited; Margaret did not know them all and even if she had known them I don't think she'd have asked them because they would have hated each other); —speaking of which, I must not omit to praise the perfection of Mark Dagger, who once said to me if there's one thing I love in this world—no, *two* things . . . *three* things!—it's DRUGS, PUSSY and GUNS! *I* said it first: FUCK apple pie, baseball, a-a-and hot dogs! It's all about *drugs, pussy, guns!* —while beside him Dickie swivelled his pale shaven head left and right, left and right, as if it were on greased bearings, and he clasped and unclasped his hands and said now Dagger don't forget beer! And beer! And beer! —*Beer!* shouted Dagger. —WHISKEEEEEEY! screamed Dickie. —One ice cube, sighed Dagger lovingly, make it a triple shot! —Alcohol! said Dickie. —*Codeine!* said Dagger. More alcohol! said Dickie. —But I *do* love acid, Dagger brooded, and Dickie said yeah I remember you on acid, all right; you was yelling *General Lee! General Lee!* and then you was kicking soccer balls down the hall! The next thing I heard, you'd jumped through your window, CRASH! and Dagger said hey Massah suck my grits! —and he was perfect, like Dickie, like Sheet-Rock Fred who sighed and had a beer and said Hitler used to say the will is all; now I say the wall is ill feeling ill, he wrote poems sitting in his truck at lunch and then it was back to the mysteries of the mudding tray, the ladder and the bazooka; he was always sailing out past the Golden Gate into storms and talking about weighing anchor for India never to return; he was going to be a pirate, a Buddha, a samurai; he would commit seppuku;

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he broke his arm when a ladder caved in on him but he wouldn't stop working so they had to reset the bone twice, and Fred had a beer and said I'm the plaster man with the master plan! and he would say you know all about Dr. Johnson don't you? you know about Mishima?

and sometimes Fred would just laugh, and you felt very sad looking at his long beard and his jacket that was white-smeared with mud from a thousand ceilings as if all the seagulls of life had crapped on him. He was my friend, and so was his sometime employee Sheet-Rock Seth, who as I have intimated was skinny and tense and stopped the car every ten minutes to jump out into the dew because he'd seen some lovely plant that had to be picked and keyed and admired while Fred sat laughing to himself very quietly; likewise Seth shinnied up pine trees from sea to shining sea and vanished among the shaking branches as Fred sat reading again about the twenty-three hundred Japanese warriors who rode silently across the moonlit snow to avenge some humiliation or other of their lord's which had happened a generation ago and most of them would get slaughtered by the castle's defenders and the ones that didn't would have to slit their bellies open anyway to show their sincerity but the important thing was HONOR as Fred agreed, sighing and sighing to think that his beautiful samurai sword had gotten stolen so how could *he* die like a warrior? . . . while meanwhile among the thrashing bowing branches whose needles raked his face and smeared his knees with sap, Seth was collecting and keying the biggest cone, which he dipped in Varithane to make it last forever and when he had a bunch of specimens rattling around in Megan's Tampax box he mailed them to the lab in Gatlinburg, Tennessee which was not far from where Seth's friend Patricia lived, Patricia who slept all her nights with a stuffed dolphin and loved Seth (hopelessly, because at that time Seth preferred to walk the Berkeley campus looking the coeds up and down and then go home to jerk off—he was not even interested in Megan!) Patricia

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loved him because while there were many naturalists in Tennessee none compared to Seth in thinness as she well knew and so did the scientists at the lab when they put down the leaves they'd been holding to the light and brushed the bark chips off each other's shoulders and sighed oh look here's *another* bunch of Seth's cones and they said that *rascal* and they opened up the box like it was Christmas and juggled the cones and called hey *Elmer* look at this one yessir I've never seen anything like it and they said is this a new *species* or a whole new *genus?* and they said now *look* at the work that boy Seth's just given us 'cause the darn pine tree textbooks will have to be *revised!* —although had the Tennessee scientists never in fact said any of this but simply thrown his pine cones into the wastebasket, Seth would not have cared because what he enjoyed, you see, was climbing trees and finding things, —but you must not believe Seth to be a mere harum-scarum conifer-thief who was UNENLIGHTENED; no indeed, he went to see a shaman who groaned *ohh* I feel so sorry for the ocean; the ocean is very angry with us because we never give it anything good to eat; we only feed *garbage* to the ocean!

and everyone else stared at the shaman as blankly as subway tokens but Seth went to the store and bought a dozen of his favorite candy bars and then he rode the streetcar all the way out to Ocean Beach, standing very straight and stern so that all the old ladies thought what a nice boy, and the driver said Ocean Beach *last* stop!

and Seth got out and walked slowly through the fog toward the ocean and the beach was littered with thousands of dead little jellyfish that the ocean had vomited up for an awful warning (what would poor weak-stomached Monique have thought?); thus Seth stood all by himself in his falling-apart old sneakers, right at the tideline, and the waves rolled foamily white around his ankles as he endured, throwing the candy bars as far out to sea as he could, and the ocean swallowed them and gurgled happily, at which Seth was happy, too, because

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he always wanted to give things to people and spirits; once he found a run-over snake for me to boil so that I could make things out of its beautiful bones. Indeed Seth was my friend, and so was Bootwoman Marisa and so was Catherine and so too Ken the street photographer who went out with Elaine Suicide for years until he got sick of her for being so difficult (not that he didn't *used* to admire her for her extreme moods, as when the three of us would go down to the Mission some winter evening with Elaine weeping and bitter for no reason the whole black time, walking three discrete paces behind us, bundled up in her thick wool coat, her arms fiercely crossed while beside me Ken said proudly isn't she *something?* isn't she *great?*); well, to make a long story longer, after Elaine moved away, sobbing it's not my fault you can't love me; it's only my fault that I found out, why, Ken rose into a whole new career: he screwed white girls and black girls and never changed the sheets so that his van reeked of pussy and Ken pissed in a juice jar and saved it until it was full (a practice he had in common with Seth, except that Seth dumped his out the window every morning, whereas Ken was certain that his was some golden California wine that increased in value with age) and Ken walked down the street with a denim cap pulled very low over his eyes because he said if you don't wear a hat then God *sees* you and *spits* on you! but though his life was almost perfect the sad truth was that he had never yet ★SCREWED AN ASIAN GIRL★, while *I* had my own Jenny Park who cooked me pork kat-su-don and was sweet to me and yelled at me and made me buy nice clothes and did my laundry, at which Ken said with true reverence *wow,* you better *marry* this one! so once upon a time Ken happened to be driving slowly down a Tenderloin street looking for Brownie, his favorite black whore who wanted to be his girlfriend and had even offered to fuck him in the North Star Laundromat, but on this most momentous afternoon Ken saw, instead of Brownie, a young Japanese woman standing very mournfully on the

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corner and I wish I could describe the beauty of her smooth face whose eyes conveyed nothing and her black glory of hair, which fell down to her breasts as she leaned a little forward with her lips pursed, looking at Ken in a way that he had never seen before, so he assumed that she must be a hooker wafted to him by the spicy winds of chance and commerce, and pulling over he stuck his head out the passenger window with his faded cap very low above his eyes like a cloud-bar, and he rubbed his unshaven chin and said get in and the woman got in and he said hi and she smiled very shyly and said hi and Ken said you are *so beautiful!* and she leaned her round cheek on her palm staring at him as she caressed her elbow and her skin was so soft and fine that Ken could hardly believe it so he said how much? and the woman just sat there because she didn't understand for as it turned out she wasn't a whore at all but something yet more still and secret who for some reason never to be known to Ken had just signed an eight-month lease on a Tenderloin apartment that smelled of insecticide while downstairs the old manageress kissed her pet bird over and over as it sat on one finger watching you with its little round eyes just as the manageress was to watch Ken and Satoko with such polite suspicion that the wrinkles radiating from her lips were like a zipper's teeth; and the manageress disconnected the front door buzzer at eight-thirty every night so that no visitors could announce themselves, which in the end was why Ken asked Satoko to give him a key, but I am now anticipating myself like a bad storyteller, for it is even possible that Ken had not yet learned these details when he banged Satoko that first day in his van and her pale shoulders trembled as she made small sounds and the next thing you knew he was buying her groceries and showing her how to cook because she knew hardly any English and was unfamiliar with American foods; Ken therefore became her mentor, pointing to a cat and saying *dog!* pointing to a dog and saying *cat!* and at first Satoko believed

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everything that Ken said, so he kept teasing her more and more until she laughed and hit him and Ken would say aw *that's* my girl Tokyo! and Satoko's father was in the Japanese Mafia and Satoko's upper teeth were false teeth because some medicine she'd had to take as a child had stained her real teeth brown, but for reasons of economy she had kept her lower teeth, which were brown, too, and Satoko lay in bed all day listening to heavy metal music very softly through her headphones while Ken was working and when Ken bought her a chicken she never bothered to put it in her refrigerator, so it rotted on the kitchen counter, at which Ken said *wow* she's *amazing!* and Satoko, who sometimes lay on the bed looking at Ken like an animal with her hands dangling down from the edge of the bed like paws and her lips parted and her pale face shining in the darkness and her black eyes glowing and glowing at Ken, was very melancholy and cried a lot and hardly ever said anything and Ken would come in tired from working for Sheet-Rock Fred and take his dusty jacket off saying aw *Tokyo* aw *girl* until Satoko laughed and hit him and I said when was the War of 1812 Satoko? and Satoko just looked at me; and my friend Bob said how long have you been in this country Satoko? and Satoko just looked at him (so Bob said to me later in private indignation why she's a moral pincushion!); and Ken said aw *Tokyo* aw *girl* and an enigmatic tear crawled down Satoko's cheek and she hung her head and Ken and I took her to strip-show bars and Satoko just sat there and the three of us rode around in Ken's van very slowly and Ken rolled down his window to yell whenever he saw a whore *hey* don't you remember me it's *me* it's *Ken Photographer!* and Satoko just sat there and I made funny faces for Satoko until she smiled. Satoko, I said are you happy or sad? but Satoko just sat there. Later Ken said she told him *I don't like these kind of question!* Ken gave her his denim cap to wear so that she would be protected even though that meant that God could see *him* now and spit on him. But Satoko rarely put it on. Ken gave her a sketchpad for Christmas

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and then she realized that she should give him something, too, and went out to buy him a shirt. Ken put the shirt on and wore it for two weeks. Sometimes when Ken was working I bought Satoko a beer in some bar and every washed-up Vietnam vet would say to me you got yourself a *honey* she's from Saigon isn't she I can tell a VC a mile off, and I said that's right, and the vet would say lemme buy you both a drink, and Satoko would stare down at the counter very peacefully as the vet called out hey Suzy a round apiece for Beauty and the Beast!

and I said thanks, and he said I'm telling you she's a *honey,* by which time I would be explaining all the jokes on the cocktail napkin to Satoko who laughed politely and then our two brown-bottled pledges of allegiance would arrive, thump, thump, and Satoko would say very softly to the vet *thank you,* and she'd drink very delicately beside me until four o'clock had come and Ken came bursting in with a big smile and hugged Satoko and said aw *Tokyo girl!* and Satoko nodded very seriously and cradled her head against his shoulder. —These outings gradually became infrequent as Satoko developed a somewhat cryptic coloration and withdrew more and more from everybody except Ken. She lived on Oreo cookies and steadily lost weight. If I came to see her (she could not be expected to respond to her buzzer but the manageress knew me by now and let me in if each time I promised never *ever* to do it again), if I went up the stinking stairs and knocked, I might hear Satoko stirring in bed, but she would not answer the door. Whenever Ken went to see his friends she waited in the van, weeping. Ken never knew why. —Neither of them used birth control once Satoko's weird Japanese contraceptives had been successfully used up, so Satoko became pregnant because, as Ken said to me Satoko just *loves* to fuck! and he said Satoko marry me and have our baby I'll support you I'll get you U.S. citizenship I'll get us a place to live, because he loved her so much, but Satoko just sat there and raised her chin at him with her heart-locket gleaming against her black dress and then she got

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an abortion, for which Ken paid half, *then* Ken took her to see his parents and said *hey* Mom and Dad guess what this is my wife Satoko she's going to have my kid can you give us some money for a wedding present how about it huh? but Ken's parents would not believe him, and Satoko just sat there staring expressionlessly at Ken's parents until her visa expired and she went back to Japan at which I said to Ken why did she come here? and Ken said laughing I never *did* figure that one out! and he loved her and missed her so much that he could scarcely bear to screw other women—although he managed once in awhile, it is true, because that way he didn't have to sleep eternally in his van which he drove down to his post box twice a week or more hoping for mail from Satoko who at least would come back in the fall to fly to Bangkok with him, a plan to which she never alluded in the letters that she wrote, saying instead *I thought I hate fuckin America but I hate more Japan cuz Japan's fuckin small country. Fuckin expensive. Fuckin SAFETY country. I like New York. I love skyscraper. That was so beautiful. Especially night view.* and Ken cried aw Tokyo what a girl! and Satoko wrote him saying *I'm really interested in Occultism, Eroticism, Cruelty, Violent and of cause Insanity. I think I'm mental masochist. Not physical! I don't like to think about happiness. I like dark side of human. I want to go to Greece someday. But I have a problem. Because I don't like Greek food!* at which Ken laughed and laughed reading her words aloud to me over and over in his van and I was so happy for him and said Ken don't let her get away I can see you really care about her at which Ken laughed again because he was embarrassed to be caught caring for someone and Ken showed me a photo he'd taken of Satoko staring so dreamily at a poster of her favorite heavy metal band with skulls and skulls all over and Ken said I hope she's saving up enough money to come back here and Satoko wrote Ken *I'm not alone anymore now. So long* (Ken did not tell me this for quite a long time; I heard it first from Painter Ben) and I told Ken I would go to Japan with him and help him kidnap

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Satoko if he wanted, but Ken only laughed. Once he called my answering machine in the middle of the night to say *well* I'm photographin' the whores [he meant lawyers] in the financial district! My agent is raisin' two thousand dollars for printing an' it's only gonna cost me two hundred! I got my first closeup encounter of a transsexual's pussy, an' I took a picture for you. It kinda caves in, an' she says it always stays tight an' she can't get any diseases 'cause it doesn't go anywhere—that was *so* beautiful! and I called the next day to say Ken have you heard from Satoko? and he said I wrote her twice but she didn't answer, and I said that's a shame, and he said Satoko's *still* my girl and I *respect* her; I'm stopping in Tokyo on my way to Bangkok and I sent her the flight time but she never answered and if she doesn't come to the airport I'll respect her more than ever! —Ken was a friend of mine, and so was stern and tousleheaded Matt in his greasy black leather jacket who loved to build machines of attack and destruction and spidery evasion and sat at the keyboard of his computer smoking and drinking beer and smoking and drinking beer and the keyboard was black with grime and he said now this here is a horse-skull robot that can only shake its head no at all the *tortures* that this other machine will *judiciously* administer! and I said well I'll be jig-jagged, and he made me a knife out of horse-bone and I hired him to make me a book with a twenty-pound steel cover and it was the most beautiful book that I had ever seen and Matt would always come with me to the transvestite bars and we'd fall in love with the transvestites together until the transvestites would squeeze us and go *oh* such muscles!

at which we'd oblige ourselves to buy them drinks and I'd try to buy Matt a drink and he'd say to the bar-girl

better take mine because *his* money's no good! then we'd swig and Matt would say time to get back to work

and he'd hop on his motorcycle and I'd wave goodbye and stand on the corner where Ken first saw Satoko and I'd lean against the liquor store wall until a pimp would say you got any questions? and I'd say yeah when

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was the war of 1812? and Matt always called me Commander and gave me good recipes for napalm. So the day went through all of them, stringing them like pearls onto a necklace of memories, polishing, polishing. This is why funerals have their place. My friends were more beautiful to me than they had always been, simply because I was going away. —But as yet I did not believe the fact. I could not believe that this wide throat of sunlight that had swallowed us and the ferry so that we could sail to the island of light ahead must soon be strangled, that something would put black fingers on it and squeeze and squeeze until the sunlight choked and died and then the place that I found myself in would be a black place, which was where Elaine Suicide lived. As long as I had known her she had been crying, because although she was loving and wanted to be glamorous (not knowing that she already was) she could not help lashing out carelessly and childishly and selfishly, so she drove away the men she adored and then was miserable and dreamed about them and cried herself to sleep or sat in bed at night smoking cigarettes and watching the moon. I did not want to go to this Crying Place, but because I was leaving my home I knew that I had to; it was black in every direction.

The Compass Rose

I had to go away, and it did not matter in which direction; I would travel like a steady little wave, cool and clean and gray, sliding up the lighter gray sand of Ocean Beach and wetting it to my own shade of gray, and where the sand of memories was wetted it would be so smooth and gray and new (as if by licking Elaine's nipples you could make them new). It was summer and everything was hot and waiting for you so you had to expand in some direction . . . but *I* needed San Francisco to be the center for me when the time for contraction arrived later in the

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season and I wouldn't have that, I wouldn't—so how could I go in any direction when any direction only took me farther away? —I could hardly go such incorrect ways as west or north; going east would take me too far east; as for south, every step in that direction was a step away from perfection. But the enemy of human nature forced me to go that way. —Yes, I first gave way to the

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SOUTH

. . . where the ocean just kept coming in and coming in, and black dolphin fins slid out from under the water sometimes and the dolphins started playing and whistling as I remembered them doing when I was four in Los Angeles and my mother took me walking over the golden hills to see them at the research station and they seemed excited to see me and started leaping and jumping in their tank and the sun was hot on the grassy hillshadows; so here in Long Beach a quarter-century later the dolphins were still happy and radios played loud in English and Spanish as planes flew overhead and long low tankers sat like the jigsaw pieces of some coastal horizon. Because of the dolphin recollections I could persuade myself for short intervals that I was still at home: Anywhere in California, a state in which I had spent half my life, was almost as good as San Francisco. —If, however, I or rather *you* were to go farther south (it *had* to be you who departed; *I* was staying in San Francisco), then the Santa Ana Freeway would bear you through a bright white haze that made your eyes water; the sky was the color of concrete, the trees a quarter mile ahead blue as in a washed-out snapshot, just like the blue outlines of skyscrapers in Los Angeles's downtown where Japanese restaurants hid inside hotels, pretending that bad air did not exist as they served you eel livers on lacquered red trays, but the one-story Korean restaurants and beauty parlors sprawled bravely all the way to the La Brea Tar Pits, and although their air conditioners roared you could still taste hellish sulphur-smog on your tongue no matter how many sweet rice-jelly desserts you ate—not that there was not a certain GRANDEUR of wide freeway-turns and vibrantly dirty evening breezes and shopping malls like cool clean palaces, but every afternoon was a hot misery to which you must pay reverence as your sports car lurched and shook itself while it sped down its lane, like a wet dog wanting to be dry; and the

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sunshine was searing in that poison haze and palm trees rose above the puny flat-roofed houses and the traffic thickened on the freeway as more and more Buicks and campers and old pickups and U-Hauls and snorting trucks merged, and white smoke came out of the factories and it got hotter and hotter and the air got worse and worse and you sped past a billboard for hair conditioner on which the woman's hair and face were spotted black with exhaust fumes and you made your breaths as shallow as could support life, and buildings were reflected in the shining flanks of the trucks you passed, and the sky glowed more and more angry-white and your eyes were burning and you sweated and felt sick and whenever you inhaled you felt a tickling in your throat and you felt so sick, so sick that you longed for the enemy missiles to hurry up and wipe it all out; but if you persisted past San Clemente the traffic would begin to lighten, drained off into the voracious new streets and houses in the former marshes and tawny-grass hills around San Diego, and you would presently come to the sign above the freeway that said MEXICO ONLY and the sign that said LAST U.S. EXIT and there would be the walkway bridge, the low, bush-speckled rises; then across the border in the blue haze was the dizzy glitter of Tijuana with its jumble of low white or gray houses on the hill, with scarcely any space between them, its upholstery and body shops saying WELCOME in case you had gotten into a collision already, its taco stands on wheels at the street corners, its men in billed caps wheeling carts of smoking meat through the traffic, its boys running through the lines of traffic hoping to wash your windows, and the day was hot and the men in tank tops swung their big brown arms. At a corner, a boy guarded a shopping cart full of watermelon pieces. You saw many fat women with beautiful orange faces. A man stood in the street waving propeller toys for sale so hopefully, and there were men in cowboy hats, and fat women and fat women and so many more, and in the heat there swam the silvery glare of the honking Mexican buses.

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Sad-faced Indian kids with dirt on their cheeks sold gum, five packs for a quarter. Sitting at a sidewalk café a block down from the burlesque show, you drank Cuervo Gold out of a big red plastic cup and nodded at the men trying to sell you plastic-wrapped bunches of flowers, while from the second- and third-story patio cafés the music came booming and booming, and you saw bottles gleaming yellow and yellow in the liquor stores. —How *many,* guy? said a man briskly, holding up a stack of bracelets. —*Zero,* you said. In doorways, Mexicans stood with their feet apart, watching you, rubbing their moustaches, stroking their hair. You pretended that all your friends were there, but you didn't believe yourself; you felt very lost. You longed for San Francisco as Ken still longed for Satoko with her little mouth and glistening white upper teeth and the dear little hairs in her nostrils and the freckles on her nose, her pale broad cheeks, her black eyes watching him as she kissed him—but Ken would have known what to do in Mexico; he'd start taking pictures and in five minutes everyone would be eating out of his hand. Margaret, on the other hand, would have bought things. She had come here with you twice, once to buy a leather pocketbook and once to purchase an extremely handsome gray blanket which you could remember seeing on her living room couch with the sun shining on it as Margaret sat listening to the radio and working and waiting for her boyfriend to take her up to Sonoma for the weekend where the two of them would drink wine and go hiking behind a waterfall that he knew about, and Margaret was humming very softly in the sun; she had sipped a beer at this very table with you and a girl had tried to steal money from her purse. —But Margaret was in San Francisco now, where you would never be again. Best not to think of that now—you were HAPPY! After all, everybody was a whore here; you liked whores. You gave a child some money and his sister came up to the table with her chin in her hands; then came *her* sister with the mahogany face, and their eyes

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were shining, and the kids all put their arms around you and the boy came back to try to sell you gum again and the girl tried to steal the gum you had already bought and the little girl selling roses patted you sweetly on the back, pulled at your chair. American servicemen with mirror goggle-glasses walked down the sidewalk with their gum-chewing girlfriends. They owned everything. They huddled like crewcut football players in the streets, yelling: *Let's go! Let's go!* —You wondered how the Mexicans could stand not to kill them. The little rose-seller flicked her finger in your face and, smiling, hopped up and down the street on one foot, clutching her four bunches of roses; if you had been in San Francisco you would have bought them all and offered one to each cardinal direction, but here you could not do it; you were spinning and puking; you were *not* at the Center. —You went to a shop where laminated pork sizzled on a spit, and you ordered a taco. They cut off nice slices of the meat that was tender and crunchy like bacon on the inside; they added relishes; they piled your taco with fresh green guacamole. —Yes, *everything* seemed very nice here; there was even a show three blocks away where the proverbial lady fucked the proverbial donkey, but everything was nice only because you beguiled yourself into standing, so to speak, on one leg, with the idiotic self-confidence of the flamingo, who will *not* realize that any passerby could kick the remaining leg out from under him; now suddenly you felt an itch of sad, sick anxiety, knowing that even if you were one of those birds who can rotate their heads right around to peck for mites between their own shoulders you would be powerless; you could not quiet yourself even by buying a dozen pigskin wallets, a hundred snakeskin belts, a thousand switchblade combs or drinking horns or knives, but you tried to pretend that you could by wandering desperately down the long tunnel of the bazaar and hoping that the loud stupid music could drown out your thoughts; you proceeded from one shop to the next, from magnet M_{32}

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to M_{33}, admiring the severe brightness of patterned blankets that partitioned them, noting that the casings of the stilettos seemed to have changed since last year when you had bought one for Ken and he took it everywhere going *click-click!* with such happy brutality that everyone watched him out of eye-corners and Ken laughed and laughed; you remembered this when you looked at some South Korean army handcuffs and you felt good again for a minute; you thought about the Handcuff Queen standing naked with a diamond ring on her long veiny finger and her pubic hair sticking up crackling with electricity and her head bent back for a good hearty yell and her wrists straining and straining ecstatically in the loops of her Taiwanese pair, which were the same kind as the pair you had bought here in TJ once for three dollars, after which you drove home to promptly and happily handcuff a jug of maple syrup to the refrigerator door to make her laugh. So, wafted Queen-ward on a wave of handcuff nostalgia, you admired the South Korean apparati and made them click eerily through themselves like their own ghosts and asked how much for these? and the quiet serious Mexican behind the glass case said fourteen dollars, and you almost bought them to make up for last time when you went through the bazaars with Margaret and bought nothing but a bottle of vanilla—unheard of! —You want service? a Mexican had said. —No, thank you, you said. —WHY? the man screamed in despair. A Mexican cried to Margaret: Get this big purse! Big enough to hold *all* your money! and Margaret laughed and said nothing, so the Mexican turned to you and demanded from behind his big wide sunglasses:

You don't want *anything* in this store? —Nope, you said. —You want this purse? the Mexican asked Margaret. —Yes, she said, but it's too expensive. —The Mexican looked you up and down in disgust. When he looked away, you knew that you had failed him forever. —Get a Mexican boyfriend, he told Margaret heavily. *He'll* buy something for you! —You still

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wanted nothing from any store except . . . except, . . . so the operative word to describe your activities was *brachiation,* which is to say the swinging by alternate arms of apes from branch to branch; at some point you would miss and fall because San Francisco was the only tree in the jungle that you knew—no, turning yourself into other animals wouldn't rescue you; you could be a ring-tailed lemur and diddle yourself with the lushly black-and-white-striped appendage that named you, but that wouldn't help in the long run; you could become a bird with an orange head, a bird whose head was crowned with green feathers like berries; but even the most shining of all peacocks must eventually fold his fantail, exhausted, and let it drag on the wet and dirty grass; no, nothing could help you, not a prayer to Jesus at the cathedral with its three yellow domes, each with its cross (you were not pure enough of spirit for your anguish to rise even as high as the clock tower); nor would a prescription for sleeping pills, filled at your parking garage's *farmacia (fundada en 1950),* be of use even though you inhaled the smell of fresh-baked bread that rose up all the yellow-painted levels to your car—no, not even your car could help you, for you were not allowed to drive in any direction but south—remember?—you had left your home and could only get farther and farther from it and new things were happening to your friends that you would not find out about because they were not important enough matters for the telephone, only important enough to change your friends just as you yourself were mutating by going south, no matter how exactly you tried to conserve yourself by stopping at Rosarita Beach with its clean sea-clouds and lime green houses, up against which people leaned and watched you, or at Ensenada, an hour south of TJ, where the restaurants had views of the sea and the prices were still American prices and the menu was in English and the songs played by the live band were in English and the beer was fresh (in the story that surrounds this parenthesis the word *beer* occurs ex-

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actly thirteen times, and the word *death* never—drink, then, and live!) and the band played on, but in San Francisco at that very minute restaurants were closing down or opening, and someone else was existing in your apartment and Satoko would never live with Ken in the Tenderloin anymore and Seth had moved to Tennessee where he fell in love with a woman as skinny as he and the weather in San Francisco was different and your friends there were forgetting you or at least doing without you; everything was different. The Handcuff Queen would be eating ice cream now, saying *So much has changed!* sitting with her legs close together and her bangs down almost to her eyes; and her elbows were drawn demurely in against her body. She would be wearing a blue dress and a white pearl necklace. Her thighs were soft and plump. She finished her ice cream and sat clasping her hands tight between her legs; she was rubbing her thighs together and looking for someone to beat her nicely and you weren't there . . . The farther south you went the worse it got. It is true that Sheet-Rock Fred had sometimes spoken of living in Mexico City for half a year or so; if you went there and waited for a very long time and were lucky you might conceivably see him (if he didn't go to India instead to get cremated beside the Ganges), but then what about Megan? or what about the Handcuff Queen? Once you had gone with that ever-so-special woman (whom even Ken was afraid of) to the South Pole Bar—a bad dismal place where there were holes between the stalls of toilets so as to pass money and commit other dirty work, a place where it was always dark and the drinkers talked in low voices except when there was a sneering match or a fight; once you had gone there with Fred and the man beside you knocked your Budweiser in your lap and said to you *now smile you sonofabitch!* and Fred smiled and said to you smile, and you smiled—which later set you afire with shame and rage; it was in this bar that the Handcuff Queen began playing pool with you and everyone laughed be-

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cause you were such a poor player; everyone was friendly to you and tried to make time with the Handcuff Queen, who taught you things such as **Never Lean on the Edge of the Pool Table Or You'll Get Punched** and you thought to yourself it's really possible; if I try hard enough I can be at home anywhere—look; *she* does it! —But later you discovered that she had been born in the Tenderloin. She was not at home elsewhere. —Nor could you ever be at home in Mexico. At night, dark figures stood with bowed heads at the side of the road. They stood beside the shops of baskets and curios; they sat on the sidewalks in three-legged chairs, and there were black hill-curves above the road and the sky was virtually starless; the white road-dots jerked by, and you drove down steep dirt hills where stretches of dingy yellow lights waited to entrap you, and families were standing outside their homes in the hot night; you saw odd long sweeps of white house-wall; you saw a very young pregnant girl crying like Elaine Suicide; you saw a woman pushing a baby carriage, smoking a cigarette whose end glowed in the darkness. Presently you would run out of gas, and then the dark figures would get you. There was nothing you could do about it. You were not allowed to go back home. If you tried, if despite the rules you did turn the red north end of the magnetic needle back toward Bathurst Island,† then they would force you to buy a toy boat, a Madonna, a model of a three-masted clipper ship, and a woman would be moving her lips silently outside your window, with her sleeping baby's head dangling in space behind her, as if its neck were broken, and she stood holding out her beggar's cup . . . If somehow you were to get beyond *her,* either because the car ahead of you had given up or for some more inscrutable reason, such as the fact that the Compass Rose is *empty* in the center of its petals, you must face the man selling fake seagulls,

†The land mass closest to the North Magnetic Pole, *i.e.* the direction of San Francisco.

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the man selling Corona T-shirts (and the passengers of other cars hunched away from him smiling), and if you inched past them until you were in sight of the border lights that glared grim and white ahead you would meet the Indian girls who sold brightly patterned wristbands, the big men lugging huge baskets for sale, while other vendors crossed their legs behind them, waiting to lure you into quagmires of fake elephants and horses, lace tablecloths and luggage, a ceramic quadruple-decker hamburger, ceramic peppers, ceramic strings of garlic, in which you would probably be lost forever, trembling and wiping your forehead as men serenaded you in hopes of money, as men walked up and down the frozen lines of traffic with guitars for sale slung over their shoulders like fruit; as men spread thin lace tablecloths before your eyes like wings; as men tried to sell you seat-covers that resembled giant biscuits; and all the vendors nodded and waved to each other and called out loudly to each other while the Americans in the cars talked soundlessly, sealed in glass worlds; women offered you bouquets of roses; a tiny Indian girl, very nicely dressed, tried to sell you vials of dairy creamer and when you said no she shook one at you. —Oh, you were long lost already! —I do admit that the border was getting closer and closer; now you could hear the helicopters that hovered over the fence to keep Mexicans in their place; sometimes their searchlights gleamed on the scale-plates of abandoned cars in no man's land; now you could read the gleaming white signs that said OPEN—ABIERTA and the darkly glittering glass of the second-floor offices ahead looked blankly down at Mexico. Men tried to sell you plastic wedding cakes, blankets, fluffy Muppets, erotic playing cards like Painter Ben's; and through the feast of red taillights ahead, you could see the blue computer screens on the second floor of the border station, and each car was suffused with the jelly-red fog of the car ahead's taillights, but you would never get to the border, and if you did the Americans would not let you through, and if they did you

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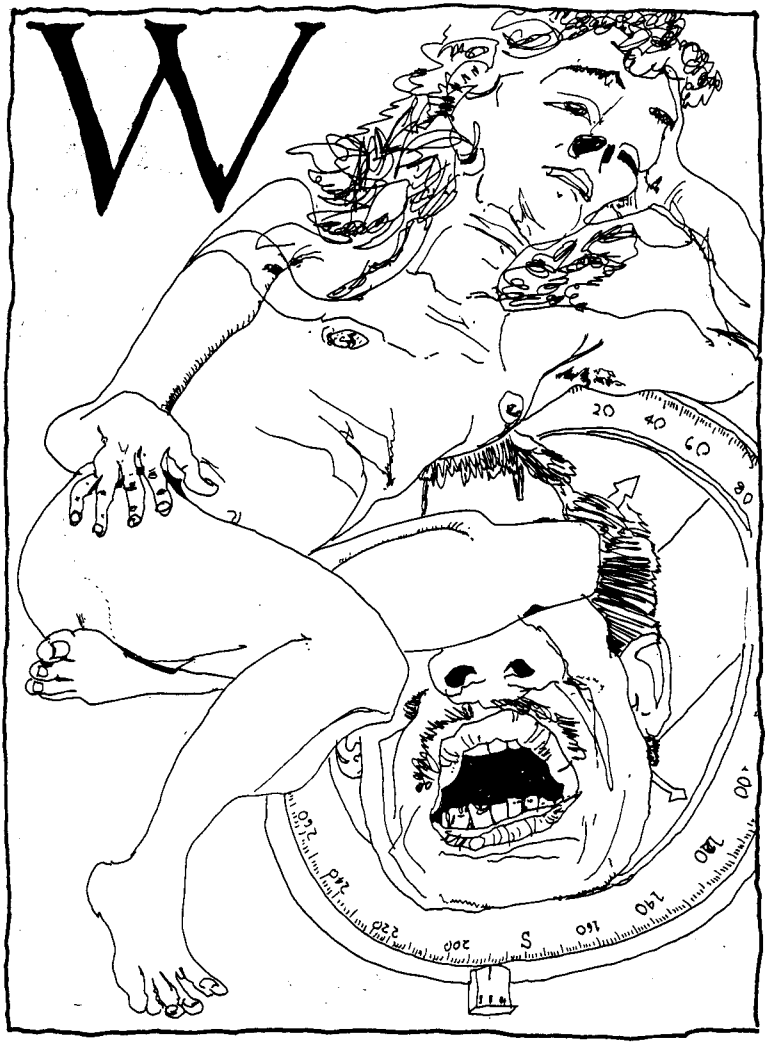
would get stuck in traffic forever in Anaheim; and if you didn't, then anyhow as I said San Francisco would have become *different.*



WEST

Well, so maybe it would hurt less if you went west to Hawaii, where the air was so richly humid that from a thousand feet up, among the steamy trees, it seemed that

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there was no dividing line between sea and sky, the blueness only becoming richer and richer as your eye descended, as if the air were thickening, hydrogen and oxygen mixing in the breeze and slowly combining like ice cream in a milk shake. The wave foam rolled in slowly and did not break against the black lava but smoothed sideways along it like bubbles in pumice. It was not too different from San Francisco, where there was an occasional freeway-side palm and at sunset the trees were black against the orange sky, so you should have felt at home, even in this slightly alien sunset that gave the grass a soft color somewhere between silver and gold, even beneath this big red sun, banded like Jupiter, that hung in a vein of pink beside the big blue fatty fog, where the remains of the rain forest lived, but when you turned on the TV you saw a newscaster whom you had never seen before and for that reason you had a bad dream that you *were* home and in your apartment again in lovely San Francisco but somehow the city had become dangerous and thugs had shot your friend Martin and thugs had smashed Ken's camera and vandalized Painter Ben's best marbleizing jobs and stolen Sheet-Rock Fred's truck and poisoned Monique in a vegetarian restaurant—she died in agony because she couldn't throw up in time—and Vera sat rocking herself and weeping in her Volkswagen that now went nowhere and Elaine Suicide pulled down her pants and stuck her ass out the window hoping the thugs would shoot (but she closed her eyes and winced); as for you, you were being followed by thugs whenever you went outdoors so you had to go to the Communists south of Market Street for help and plead your case with many twirls of a red flag, like a devout Tibetan turning a prayer-wheel, until at last they agreed to render fraternal assistance and then you sat very quietly with the Communists in your room while the military adviser set the charge. He had promised you that nothing in your room would be hurt; the bomb would blow up all the thugs safely and efficiently and inevitably. But you felt

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uneasy because everyone was staring moodily down at the floor and sipping water from the bathroom sink and whispering. Your ethical double-champions had told you that once the bomb went off you would have to run to escape from the police. Quietly, you got your pistol from the bureau and strapped the holster on. One of the Communists wanted to see it. You kept the gun, but thumbed the magazine release, and the magazine popped softly into your hand and you passed it to him to admire, at which he smiled with a sort of virginal shyness so that you understood that he would now demonstrate the folk arts of his native autonomous region; he put the magazine to his mouth, he placed his delicate brown fingers over the bullet indicator holes and began playing it like a flute; and all the other Communists came and sat on your bed beside you with their arms around your shoulders—yes, it was certainly beautiful, but you felt more anxious than ever because you were disarmed now except for one bullet in the chamber of the pistol; and suddenly the sentry at your living-room window hissed and everyone held his breath as the adviser came in smiling; he had set the charges; everything was ready for the thugs—but a woman clapped her hand to her mouth in horror because she saw blood slowly staining his shirt; the thugs had gotten him. Nevertheless no one said anything about it; he had only been a Spartacist who defended bureaucratically deformed workers' states. He sat down heavily on your bed; a compass fell out of his pocket and the needle was pointing west, which was the direction the thugs were coming from . . . now your heart pounded like a string of concussion-bombs because you could see your enemies goose-stepping up the street in their black shirts that said N and S and E and W, and in their arms they bore a great nuclear compass in a concrete housing—it was stolen, no doubt—and they threw it down and stamped on its thick glass face with their jackboots until it cracked inside with many spider-tracks like the patterns on a frosted window and the thugs stamped harder until

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it shattered and then they wrenched the long, thin, black, sharp, radioactive compass needle out of it and strode laughing up to your window, getting ready to hurl their nasty spear, but then the dying Spartacist's bomb went off, and there was a silent flash, and confetti was raining down on the street. Something had gone wrong. The thugs ran off with their tongues lolling out of their mouths like dogs. Then the shock wave of the blast struck; your house trembled and began to move. It slid slowly down the street. (The acceleration vector is parallel to that of the magnetic force.) You rushed to the window and screamed to people to stay out of the way, but no one could hear. The Communists sat on the bed confounded. Your house was going faster and faster, past the running police and down a hill and up the next one past the white mansions of Pacific Heights. The Spartacist was dead. You sped past a May Day procession, a funeral; you slid down Divisadero Street and up the next hill and down into the sea; the Communists screamed and tried to shoot out the windows but it was too late; you were at the bottom of the ocean, a thousand miles down, in a cemetery of rotten ships and escaped houses; you could never come home again. —You woke up in Hawaii; you went walking on the lava, which resembled freshly turned soil in a house lot in San Francisco, with the grass running weedy riot; you drove along the coast, on a narrow road along which yelling teenagers sped in old cars; you visited the ancient Place of Refuge where the trees were big-leaved and steamy; you drove on and on until Hawaii seemed to be a part of California, with its sun and long dry roads along the coast as if it were San Diego or even maybe Mendecino on a hot day, but there were no smoothies and the passion-fruit juice was not fresh squeezed the way it was in Berkeley and there were no helpful toxic-warning decals on the gas pumps although in Hawaii things were not *all* bad because you *could* suck on rum-soaked sugarcane whenever you felt like it or pick green coconuts from the tree and smash

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them open to drink the milk or mix the milk with rum so that you forgot that you were not in San Francisco anymore and might never ever live there again (which meant that you had no home); you staggered along some black-lava breakwater or other which was guarded by screw pines and tree ferns; you had another belt of rum and there was a warm wind to turn your shirtcuffs into sails; and there were so many red and lavender flowers bursting out of the wall of wet green leaves around the waterfalls and tree ferns roofed you over graciously, creaking thickets of yellow green bamboo providing their own flavor of shade so that the air was cool and refreshing to the skin, and your tears of homesickness felt very cool and precious and the bamboo leaned together to make a many-stalked tunnel through which a stream flowed and spiderwebs strung the tops of the banana trees together and everywhere you looked, stalks and leaves made some elaborate shade pattern, and little falls trickled in single or paired streams down the lava wall, rebounding from pool to pool; and there were leaves like spiders, leaves like frogs, leaves wide enough to sit on, taro leaves like lions' teeth, and you were enchanted with all the shapes but then you came to the top of a great waterfall and the liana wall was behind you and the fall was before you and below you like a wake, a jet trail, white within white, passing strata of lava and grass and moss as it rushed down the lava wall with a sound like gravel; it fell down and down into a black lava cup that you could not even see into because the ground was very muddy and slippery, and all of the sudden you knew that you were going to fall as your house of dreams had fallen and to keep from falling you had to stand a few feet back from the edge, back behind the Hapu'u ferns and the spiderwebs, and you cried like a baby among the heliconia and the pale orange ilima blossoms.

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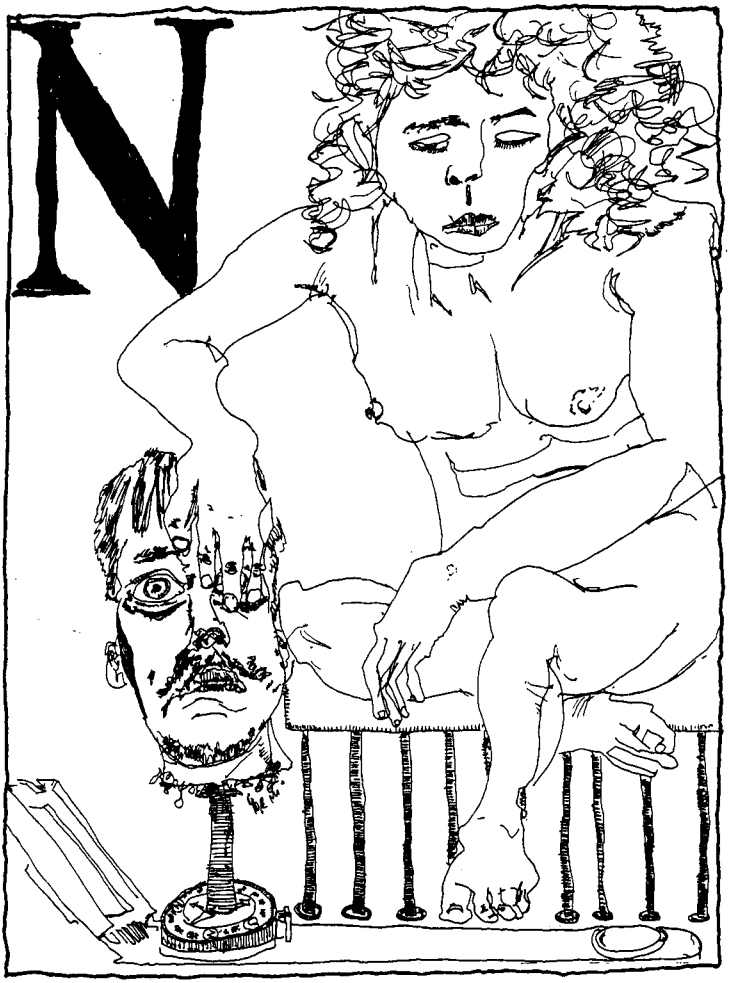

NORTH

So you blew the dust off the sighting mirror of your compass, whose precision lines framed your face as if you were looking at yourself through the reticule of a sniping rifle; you corrected the black dial for declination and lined up the needle with the base plate so that you were going due north from San Francisco, and you followed

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your nose. You knew that north would hurt when its fists began to strike you, but maybe it would hurt less than west. "Never until now have American men and machines struck directly at Communist North Vietnam!" —DOD newsreel, 1965. —So you left the beautiful round-faced Vietnamese children rolling marbles in the streets of San Francisco; you left Elaine Suicide rocking herself smoking cigarettes and saying I'm *so* sick of myself . . . you left the green hedges of Union Square where the couples sat on the benches holding each other's hands and people sat on the grass that was cut as smooth as pool-table felt and pigeons fluttered over that happy greenness and the shrubs were blossoming in their boxes and the palms rose high in the evening; you left the whores (from whose cunts electricity shot out like maple seeds) on Ellis Street begging you for needles saying if you ever want a few extra dollars you can get $3 *apiece* for 'em! you left the conclaves of sheet-rockers meeting in bars on rainy nights with their yellow slickers white-spattered with sheet-rock stains and the sheet-rockers said to each other how ya pullin' through? —and they answered just fine, that's why Walgreen's sells Vaseline —haw!—which reminded Sheet-Rock Fred of the one about the difference between eating out a Jewish girl and eating a bowl of Jello; you left home, in short, and went north to Gualala among the blueberries and the huckleberries, and you liked Gualala because it was only half a day's drive from San Francisco and the smell of sun on the clay of the pygmy forest was so good; you loved the way that trees leaned against trees and the way that tree-twigs fared downward like the ribs of fishes, and you fed your compass sweetheart the pale young needle-shoots of spruces and hemlocks because those were the sweetest, and the earth was so luxuriously giving that you could run down an almost vertical slope without fear because your heels sank deep into the loam with every step to make steps for you; you hugged the azaleas for fun; you ate some miner's lettuce, and there was a breeze

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and the soft hills were like birds waving their fern-wings, but then the blackness that Elaine knew so much about was clawing at you and your heels slipped and you tumbled down the hill cutting your face on prickers and falling farther and farther north, past Willits where you and Seth had set up a tent one night and been scared by a raccoon, magnifying it into a brown bear, a black bear, a grizzly bear, a polar bear, a softly terrifying monster of immense cunning preparing to smother you with its night-bulk; you left the state of grace, which is to say the state of California, and continued north to Oregon and Washington; you now dropped entirely out of our great nation, suffering considerably from the speeding helplessness imposed on any particle moving in a circle perpendicular to a uniform magnetic field, and you tumbled into British Columbia with the rivers of the Fraser Valley roaring in your ears; you passed the Canadian Rockies that loomed snowy and tree-bearded high above you; you bounced into the soft wet tundra of Chetwynd, where years before you and Seth had camped and listened to the wind and everything was mossy and lonely; that was the summer that Seth had borrowed your copy of Sir Walter Scott's *Old Mortality* and read it studiously while you both waited at the roadside for a car or truck to come by, to stop, to take you farther north; and Seth would be laughing and laughing over the first page so hard that he'd have to put the book down to get his breath, and then he'd chew a little beef jerky and drink condensed milk and look around at the greenness and loneliness and pick up the book again and start all over because he'd lost his place, and before he'd found it again he'd be laughing even harder than before, gasping for breath at the quaintness of the old schoolmaster; roaring and wheezing, he finished the first page and laughed so hard that he had to sit down, and then the two of you got a ride north and Seth put the book away; the next morning by the roadside he took it out of his pack, where it had become dog-eared, and read the first page again and

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it was even funnier to him than before; he read it over and over, and sometimes it rained as he stood there, and big raindrops spattered the book and the print ran a trifle, and sometimes you and Seth had to ford rivers and the book got soaked in Seth's pack, and later on you and Seth hiked the Arctic snowfields and the pages froze and stuck together, but enterprising Seth pried the pages apart with his knife and found page one again and solemnly he stood there perusing its smeared print and the corners of his mouth began to twitch and you could not help but grin as you watched him and the first whinny of laughter burst out of him despite his concentration and he snorted and chortled and chuckled so hard that you were both laughing until your sides ached and the book thawed and froze and got waterlogged and moldy over the weeks and strata of stuck-together pages peeled apart: —although the book was half a thousand pages long and only once did Seth get to page two, it is evident that of all the book's readers, students and devotees Seth was the best and most faithful. —But you and Seth had returned to San Francisco in time; *now* doing that was against the law. (Seth's housemate Megan still lived there; once she had told you: you know, some of my favorite books I've never even *read.*) Wearily, you impelled yourself deeper and deeper into Canada and it was snowing loneliness all about you and you were in the Arctic archipelago with angled waves striking the shores of islands whose black snow-ridges and snow-knobs swirled with snow, whose big wide gorges were sinewed with snow (once in San Francisco there had been snow at Sutro Tower for a day, so you and your sweetheart, Clara Bee, went excitedly up to see this new thing, stopping at the corner store on Parnassus to get garlic bagels and smoothies and smoked oysters, and you went up hills and hills and the view got prettier with every step; you walked along Ashbury or was it Clayton Street and looked down 17th Street at the Castro and Noe Valley spread out below you in the sun, with Mission Dolores and the palm trees and churches,

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and you turned up narrowing twisting streets and passed the house that looked like a Spanish dungeon and Clara Bee, who would later drop you like a compass with a stuck needle, was holding your hand and you were thinking about the snow and feeling very happy and here it was, almost a finger-width of it, so chilly, so pure and white, and you two laughed and sprinkled it in each other's hair and had your picnic and agreed to get married and went back down to the sun as the snow, abandoned, melted sadly behind you). —In the Arctic there was all the snow you could eat. The shores of the fjord curved back and forth, and the green gray water widened until it became the Arctic Ocean. Three white hares with up-pricked ears went bouncing and leaping across the snow in silent anxiety. A great white snow-pyramid stood at the head of the fjord, opposite Skull Point with its low orange sky-bar on the horizon (soon the sun would go away for the night, for the winter; you would not see it until April), and the sharp translucent purple ridge of Axel Heiberg Island was like a knife edge slicing the evening, slicing your heart open with its beauty, and the sun was painfully orange, about to vanish into the V in the island's last ridge, and there was a purple gray sea-calm below you despite the freezing breeze; the snow was knee-deep, and a tiny white iceberg floated before the great white headland that you stood on, and the island went on and on northwards through the pack ice that got more and more contorted until it was mountains to struggle over on the way to the Pole where you could stand homesick and frozen stiff while the world revolved around you . . . Every night in your sleeping bag you put on your one dry pair of socks, a soft white pair that Elaine Suicide had given you, and they felt so soft and warm on your feet that as the nights of whiteness and glare wore on you came to think of them as meaning warmth, and you thought of Elaine and kissed them. But of course you wouldn't see Elaine anymore; you were so far away from her that her suicidal glamour seemed as warm and homey

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as Sausalito. You remembered Melissa the whore who one day was downcast on Jones Street because she couldn't get any business and the kids were making fun of her; and you loved Melissa, so you gave her a pep talk:

Remember, Melissa (you declaimed,) remember that you are the •*prettiest,* •*sweetest,* •*most intelligent,* •*SEXIEST* whore on Jones Street, and all men love you and want to date you, but you're only going to date the *richest* ones, which means that by tomorrow you're going to be a millionairess; you'll have *all* the dope and crack and smack you want; then I *know* you'll buy me a giant burger with mushrooms and *grilled* not *raw* onions and San Marino relish the way they make it on Clement Street —and Melissa was smiling and laughing and brightening like a shirt on Haight Street being tie-dyed, because one moving charge does really truly exert a magnetic force on another moving charge, and sometimes two people can even help each other; so you felt good and you felt even better when Melissa hugged you and gave you a kiss for free. But Melissa would not like it up here. No, you would never see *her* again, either. —Now the wind began to blow and you had to lie inside your sleeping bag for days and days, just as you did when you were up here with Painter Ben and he smoked two packs of cigarettes a day out of desperate boredom and played solitaire over and over while the tent shuddered and strained and he cried out this is the *most idlest* trip I've *ever* been on!

and the water froze and the toothpaste froze and your boots froze solid and all your socks except for Elaine's froze and you licked your lips suffering from California orange-juice withdrawal and day by day the wind nudged your tent and shrank it around you because the ground had been frozen so hard that you hadn't been able to stake the corners down so you'd had to hold them with rocks which the wind rolled closer and closer on all sides and then the six-month darkness came and you lay trapped in a frozen scream with a film of ice over your mouth and eyes like the Franklin Expedition seamen in

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their graves on Beechey Island, and as your blood slowly turned to a reddish black Popsicle you dreamed of escaping south but your feet had been so long frostbitten that they were gangrenous and even if they weren't, even if you could start running south and south across the frozen sea, you would eventually fail the test of Orpheus and look behind you, whereupon you would see a white speck sunning itself on greenish ice—a polar bear! and even as you looked at the bear the bear looked at you and began following you, he was gaining on you, grinning a black grin at you and you could see the darknesses inside his ears; he smelled you and saw you all too well; he was running toward you to devour you; and even if you were to cut a hole in the sea crust with your ice ax and dive in, you would not much postpone your fate; the polar bear would wait beside and a little behind the hole so that you could not see anything, waiting and waiting to swat the life out of you with his paw, and hypothermia was getting you in the water anyhow, to say nothing of oxygen starvation, and you knew that life was only going to get worse. —No, north wouldn't do at all, so by default you had to proceed

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EAST

On this longest day of the year you were going away from LA on a warm desert evening with houses and houses all around, sucking up the water like vampires, and you kept going through the dry mountains and down into dusty blue valleys, heading steadily east, and as night fell you sped down and down to Needles and the air got hotter and hotter as if you were going to hell and the motels glowed with neon lights, one color per customer, and you crossed into Arizona and there were ocotillos and chollas and lightning-flashes all night as you lay naked in the hot hills and yearned already for San Fran-

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cisco as Ken yearned to kiss the stubble in Satoko's armpits as she stood there in her black nightgown looking at him with her hands on her head and Ken said Tokyo? Tokyo? Are you my girl? and she smiled and said very softly yeah and the next morning you continued east along Highway 40 and the blue mountains and mesas rose like dreams above the yellow grass. North of Flagstaff, in the San Francisco Peaks where the Hopi kachina spirits live, lightning flashed like a snake's tongue. It was sunny, and it thundered. Little raindrops fell upon your lips. You lay upon a rock, and red ants crawled there, and black ants too, as big as your toe. Again you chewed the tender bitter needles of evergreens. (When you brought a handful home, Margaret thought them too bitter.) Dandelions and blue flax danced in the meadow; in a sandier spot you came across the reddish orange treasures of Indian paintbrush. You ran uphill through the tunnels of white aspen and reached another hot yellow meadow browsing with bees, and more aspen forest whose creamy trunks were as smooth as poles, and then a steep slope of evergreen forest, which was littered with the gray trunks of windblown trees, some hollow, some swarming with ants, and after much labor among the snapping twigs you came to the crest of the hill and there was a grassy dome where mulleins grew as high as your head and inside each one was a white moth and the blades of mountains rose purple gray, high above the rolling hills, whose grass was soft like yellow corn dust, and the smell of dust was good and clean, and there was snow on Humphrey's Peak; and you ran laughing down and down again, past a dead black witching tree with branches like ribs, like the branches in Gualala, like the branches everywhere, and you continued east, with flat ridges in the distance speckled with grayish blue shrubs, and it was night and then morning and the patches of sunlight on the chaparral made it gold; and there were clouds over the mountains with cloud-stuff eternally bursting from them in a frozen explosion of purity, and

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you saw a purple scorpionweed and then trees and dust and mountains. But the San Francisco Peaks were not San Francisco . . . Continuing east, nonetheless, because you had to, you traversed the Painted Desert with its many distances of blue and gray and yellow; you stopped at all the diners you could, so as to look at the proud dark-skinned waitresses in their silver-adorned belts, with their black hair that fell loose or braided to their waists, hurray! They brought you red chiles and green chiles; they tossed their heads in a glitter of turquoise earrings. Their Spanish accents were sweet to your ears. As they served you, you pretended that you were home and it was sunny and foggy as it so often is in San Francisco, as it was that time when you tried to drum up business for the Handcuff Queen so you brought Martin to her beauty parlor and the Handcuff Queen poured you wine and started cutting Martin's hair as strangely as she could, so that it hung down over his forehead like a wet braided root, and when "You Only Live Twice" came on, she hummed along and said *oh! turn it up!* and meanwhile one of the other girls said I have a date to get my earlobes sewn up this afternoon and the Handcuff Queen said are you for *real?* and Martin said I want my ears to show and the Handcuff Queen cried exasperatedly *why* do you always wait till the last minute to ask that? It's like waiting till the last minute to ask for a rubber! and Martin said you see I just don't want my boss complaining and the Handcuff Queen drank more wine out of a paper cup and said coolly that's *his* problem but then she asked tenderly so can you handle having a little more fullness down there or should I take it down more? and the music was sunny and spicy as the Handcuff Queen cleaned a razor and applied it between head and ear, as meanwhile Lisa beside her finished with her last customer; —usually I take a bike ride after work but today I don't think I will, said Lisa, frowning into the mirror and spraying her hair with delicate toots of the atomizer, and you yawned and had another cup of

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the Handcuff Queen's wine and Lisa said aren't you even going to ask why not? so you finally said why not? as you looked out at the sunny street and Lisa said 'cause I've been *drinking* since ten o'clock and I'm going to take a nap! and the Handcuff Queen said you sure can't hold your liquor girl, you must've been in that bathroom a dozen times! and Lisa walked with little wriggles and hip thrusts whenever your eyes or Martin's eyes were on her and you had another cup of the Handcuff Queen's wine and you were perfectly happy, like Elaine Suicide when she was a little girl at Catholic school and she sang the Pied Piper song so well that the nuns gave her a whole string of lollipops. Now you wouldn't see Elaine or the Handcuff Queen or Lisa or Martin anymore; nor would you meet any of the Arizona or New Mexico waitresses again, but precisely because they were vanishing, vanishing, they reminded you of home, so you enjoyed thinking of them just as you used to do with Painter Ben while you and he zipped along in his white Gem Top, a long trail of dust pointing the correct direction behind you, the direction opposite to yours, and you tried to occupy yourself by visualizing the waitress at the Four B's Diner (Be Hungry, Be Happy, Be Healthy, Be Back), even though you remembered less and less of her; you could barely see her hair spilling down her back anymore, streaming like a Hawaiian waterfall from its wide beret (and you fell down the waterfall into the black cup; your house fell into the ocean; you fell onto the North Pole and were impaled); you could barely see her sad, stern face, and you had never known what she was called.

—What do you think her name was? you asked Ben.

—Maria, he replied, they're all Marias. She had a nice little beer belly on her, he added unromantically. But you were sure now that she had been glamorous, like Elaine Suicide . . . In Albuquerque Ben bought glass Christmas tree ornaments at the crafts fair to give as presents because, he said I resent it when people give

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me gifts—if I can't eat it or use it up, at least let it be glass so I can break it! He was going to give them away in San Francisco. But *you* weren't. You were traveling too far, too fast, because you were traveling away. You had to go this way; you had been a butterfly of the four directions and this was the only one left. San Francisco westened and westened behind you . . . In Utah, Suzie the blonde waitress smiled at you as she brought you your fried chicken and buttermilk, and she asked you if everything was okay and could she bring you anything else and she really meant it and when you were finished she said to *please* have a *good* night and because she reminded you of Megan the Georgia beauty queen, who reminded you of home, you drew a heart with an arrow through it on the check and then you paid and went out, peering shyly at the mechanical bear across the street that raised its arms ever so slowly as if to bless you, and outside the town the red buttes were dotted with green . . . In the twilight, when the deer came out, and a hot evening wind blew your tent like a tumbleweed so that you had to run to catch it and stake it down, the cliff-castles of Utah darkened and the grass became pale and vague and the cicadas sang and the crag walls far away were purplish blue and the sky was a glowing bluish yellow like a lantern slide of a faded watercolor, and the shape of every leaf was black and perfect above the ridge where the sky was, but below it the trees were inkblots on sticks; and the light in the sky became darkness, and everything was so beautiful that you were miserable because you were going to leave it. You had to keep going east. For a long time you sat in the darkness, feeling the warmth of it and the space of it, watching the lovely desert stars until the sky began to glow again and the northern rim of the canyon began to be visible again in all the deceptive detail of moonshine, and the cliff wall to the south was so solid black with moonlight behind it that you wondered how you ever could have tried to go south; and the night went on and on around you . . . Yes, you were going east. But you would resist. You would

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not set your watch forward, ever; you would stay on San Francisco time. You would always tell people that you were from San Francisco, even ten years from now. You would call San Francisco every day; you would call the people you knew there and make them wave their receivers out the window so that you could hear the fog and the clouds. You would never buy a bed; you would only sleep in a sleeping bag inside a tent in the exact center of whatever living room you might be forced to rent, with your head facing west. You would keep your possessions in a suitcase; you would maintain your compass at San Francisco declination.—You would do none of these things.—You would take the plane and get it over with. (You were pathetic because you could not keep what you loved the way it was.) You would fly out of Las Vegas because that gave you an excuse to go a few miles west again, back toward the center of the Compass Rose, San Francisco, with all its lovely pistils and stamens . . . Rolling west through the Virgin Mountains, brightening with every spurious mile, you rode the smooth freeway past gas-station–casinos whose signs said things like NO BARE TOPS NO BARE BOTTOMS NO BARE FEET and you drove past the exits that vanished eerily behind desert ridges so that you could never see any of the towns to which they hypothetically led. Enjoying the heat on your elbow that rested on the frame of the open window, you came to a rise and suddenly saw the dim blue skyscrapers of Las Vegas, and mountains very far behind them, riding the haze as though whatever connected them to earth had been dissolved; and presently every exit led to houses and trees and condominiums and hotels and then you got to the Strip. —The airport was surrounded by obscenely green grass watered with sprinklers, every drop of which should have been worth as much as a drop of blood; and inside it was air-conditioned and there was a ripply pattern on the carpet so that you felt like Christ walking on a coolly buoyant sea, and the slot machines sang songs like two-note electronic xylophones.

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Leaving

My T-shirt is dirty from traveling, so I decide to buy another. How many exiles, after all, have you seen disembarking from the military jet without a suit and tie to cozen the press crew that stand scuffing their feet in the gravel of the strange runway? I see an extra large shirt that says LAS VEGAS and I think it would make me belong to own it, so I pay the ten bucks and take it into the MEN's room, where I strain and strain to pull it on, thinking, my, these foreign customs! and all the MEN are looking over their shoulders at me as they piss, making me more and more embarrassed until I finally wrench that uniform of alienness down over my head there in front of the mirrors where the MEN are washing their hands and staring at me, but the tail will not even reach to my belly button. Maybe this means that I should not have left San Francisco. Please, Sheet-Rock Fred, where are the twenty-three hundred Japanese warriors who will ride silently across the moonlit snow to avenge me? —*Oh,* we only sell children's t-shirts, explains the saleslady, and there are *no* cash refunds; I'm *really* sorry. Maybe *this* one would fit, sir—unless you'd rather exchange it for a baseball hat. —Like Fred, I have no samurai sword with which to let the anguish inside my belly loose upon this unsuspecting world. I could slit myself open with my Buck knife, I guess; instead I take the other shirt, which does fit, just barely, but burdens me from groin to clavicle with the giant countenance of Mickey Mouse leering at the world like some wide-eyed buck-toothed Big Brother. Seth's friend Patricia, the one with the stuffed dolphin, might now admire me, but I cannot admire myself, and the MEN stare at me as if I am retarded. Indeed I am, for thus accoutred, I have thoughts of seeing Las Vegas. Maybe I'll find some easy fifth direction, some *something* about the place that I can adjust my needle to. If not, then I can deny the future a little longer (not that I don't know how silent everyone will be on the airplane

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during the silent movie and then they will be restless and go back and forth in their seats so that they'll hurt each other's knees and they'll gobble sandwiches and thrust their heels into each other's knees—how madcap!)—deny it, I say, by peering round me at this glaring blaring present so bereft of associations. I don't care about anything. —Las Vegas it is.

First things first: Downstairs.

Where can I go where I can sit and have a drink and not be bothered? I ask the lady at the ice-conditioned limo concession.

Well, she says slowly, the drinks at the Barbary Coast aren't *too* expensive.

Does Mark Dagger go there?

Mark Dagger? Oh, you mean the one with all the rhinestones? Yes, I believe I saw him there the year before last, with Johnny Carson. That's the Mark Dagger you mean, isn't it?

That's the one. How about Satoko?

Satoko? Can't say that rings a bell. You know how it is; there are so many stars coming through here. Sir, there's a line behind you. Do you want a ticket for the Barbary Coast or not?

The Barbary Coast it is! I cry genially.

The look at me and shake their heads.

I pay, I go out, and thanks to all my practice with orienteering north and south, I soon locate the line of

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people, owned by their leaden suitcases, who stand wiping their foreheads and hitting their children and waiting for the limousine.

You going to the Riviera? inquires the "starter," a wolfish tallish tanned lifeguard type whose blond haircut must be worth at least a hundred bucks. His skull is derived from the primitive diapsid condition.

Not me, I say. The Barbary Coast.

The **Barbary Coast!??!!!!!!!** cries the "starter" in horror. What *do* you want to go *there* for?

People are shuffling and coughing. My indecision is wasting their time.

I just want to sit down and drink and be left alone, I explain weakly

but the "starter" shouts: *No one's* going to *hassle* you; Vegas is *not* that kind of town!

and one of the tourists says disgustedly what did you *come* here for if you don't want to spend money?

and I say well, uh, I *do,* maybe even five or ten dollars . . .

and he looks away from this shamefully unflushed dissident turd called me, and everyone else looks away, too

and he pretends to puke

and he claps me on the shoulder and says: how about it, *pal?* The Riviera or not?

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The Riviera it is! I say bravely. (Would that the Handcuff Queen had shackled my tongue!)

Into the limousine. The "starter" snaps the rope behind me; I am the last passenger on this crossing to Paradise and the others must wait. The driver opens the door for me. The back seat appears to be full, although I cannot say for sure because I have not gotten inside yet and so my science-fiction sunglasses have not undarkened. —Well, I had just better swivel my butt in (hoping that my raggedy blue jeans, which hang very loosely around my hips [because despite the many plate-heaps of green and red chiles served me by the aforementioned Arizona and New Mexico waitresses—whom I can never forget—I have lost ten pounds in the desert], will not slide down to my ankles, thereby revealing that I am not wearing any underwear—for the sufficient and simple reason that all I own is dirty), but as I thus position my posterior as close to the window as possible, I hear a scream, and nerve messages speeding to my brain make me understand within mere seconds (such is the speed of the average neuron) that I have sat down on a child sitting in its mother's lap. —*Sorry* about that is all that I can say, but there is only icy silence, so that I wonder if perhaps I didn't say it at all, but only thought it—but then it would be even worse if I *had* said it and forthwith said it again like some smart-aleck from Nowheresville, so I keep silent, with my ass sticking out the open door while I wonder where to put it. Disgustedly, the driver comes back and flips down a special seat for me like a baby seat that was right in front of me all along, but I would never have discovered it, because it was concealed in the black vinyl complexities of the front seat and even now my glasses are only half-undarkened. So I sit down; my pants do slip down an inch after all, and there I am half bare-assed in the baby seat with my Mickey Mouse T-shirt on and I am definitely in Las Vegas.

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It is very dark inside the limo, which is only allowed to be air-conditioned when the driver has passengers and is in motion, which is to say now. The driver pulls quite rapidly away from the curb, at which I stare as if it were long lost San Francisco; I want to imagine another farewell party at which my best friend, the "starter," is the honored guest; for I am leaving him now, too, leaving, *leaving!* and the driver thumb-stabs the most powerful icy-cool button available so that the air conditioner shrieks in my ears as if I were back in the Arctic and in despair I ask myself now why didn't I go *that* way? forgetting that I already did, forgetting the terrifying magnetic storms—but then oblivion is my heart's desire; I admire the wind-scream of this limousine precisely because it mercifully masks whatever any of the other passengers (whom I still can't see) may or may not be saying about me; meanwhile it is still very hot. —Off we go.

Between the streets are sand dunes and desert shrubs. We pass by the Pussycat with its SEX ACTS, and more sand dunes and scores of other places that say SEXATIONAL or TOPLESS (now I know where the BARE BOTTOMS people who aren't allowed into the gas station casinos must come: in these places, I am sure, the B-girls' breasts are the size of other girls' buttocks; nothing would be more American and directionless than to squeeze those sweetnesses), and we pass more sand dunes and then we're on the Strip and there are green lawns everywhere.

Outside the Riviera, where the air is hot enough to give me hyperhidrosis, everyone gives the driver a two- or three-dollar tip. I reach into my pocket (which has a hole in it), hesitate between two pennies and a dime, and finally give him a quarter.

Thank you, sir, he says very stolidly.

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I am not sorry for him. After all, I am an exile; after all, he'd never helped with *my* baggage!

The limo departs. I reach into my shirt pocket, pull out my compass, and throw it down on the sidewalk. It does not smash until I grind it under my heel. I kick it into the street and a car runs over it.

Now for GAMBLING. That is what you do when you have been expelled from San Francisco—which has happened to me! This is the most hateful place that I can imagine—because I am in it. (I remember a breeze, and Margaret smiling, and decide never to remember it again.)

Where can I get change for the slot machines? I ask the bell captain, whose flaming livery and insouciantly upturned moustache, upon whose ends I half expect to see balanced a pair of glass balls, proclaim him more a man of the world than I in my Mickey Mouse shirt could ever hope to be.

Thirty yards to the left, he says, troubling himself even so far as to point in that direction, which I still know; all the same I am grateful to him, for I hope not to know it much longer.

I take a sighting on a change machine, and try each of my dollar bills, but they are too dirty; the machine will not take them, and so as usual, like Ken saying Tokyo? Tokyo, why are you crying? I am defeated. I walk on into the dim coolness, stunned by the thunderous percussions of jackpots, the suspenseful reveille-tootings and hummings of slot machines, and I see a fat man playing electronic poker and the colored lights are glaring on his glasses; I see a woman pull the lever and win two quarters

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and purse her lips very tightly and look both ways like a bad dog shitting on the carpet; I find a human-operated change booth at last and request ten dollars in quarters and the woman (whose cheeks have been marbleized as if by Painter Ben) gives me a roll and says ten dollars!

and *winks* at me and I smile back and start putting them into a slot machine one by one. The machine eats four dollars and then chokes and turns red and vomits a dollar fifty into my hand, and I am quite elated because I have *won.* A cocktail waitress who happens to be all legs comes by, but I do not want to drink standing, like a needle that does not dare to spin; suddenly I feel that something terrible and secretly expected is about to happen to me, striking me from that hypothetical fifth direction or some strange angle previously unmeasured by my compass clinometer; so I turn north and east and south and west (the known and therefore useless directions), searching for danger; needless to say, with my compass broken as in my dreams I am not aligned for any use, and there is nothing to do but listen to the paunchy corpses cheering at the CRAPS table (everything here reminds me of excrement); and after that why not go out and sit by the pool, where beautiful and ugly girls dive into the shimmering blue water, cleaving it with their hands and swimming true west toward my former home while I think about the shit and bowels inside them? They dive and dive; out of habit, or perhaps in Ken's memory, I look between their legs. I am becoming evil.

Cocktail? *hints* a new waitress who's also all legs.

A margarita, please, I say.

Knowing that it will be $3.50, I have the money already counted out from my change cup, plus a 50¢ tip to display my graciousness, there being nothing left to as-

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pire to any longer but the noblesse oblige of the bell captain, who has assuredly forgotten me. I will never see him again. —Miss Legs returns with my margarita, which is to say my chilled heap of salt-topped white slush in a plastic goblet, and it does not look at all promising, but then neither do I, for I am wretchedly sad, weary and bestubbled; I am an outlaw—or would be if I were not the Ghost of Insignificance.

Three-fifty? I say.

Ex*act*ly, says Miss Legs, bored.

I give her the four, and she sweeps it into her apron without counting it, which grieves me and makes me wish that I hadn't given her any tip—for at the end of the day how will she know that it was *I* who thought so considerately of her? (Already I am falling into old habits: I seek to make friends and become KNOWN. Why don't I go fuck myself? —But I'd asked myself that in Tijuana.) Not only that, but the margarita tastes like sugared pool cleanser. Shaking my head like Matt's horse-skull robot, I peer down through the sweet and translucent waste of liquid that must go inside me now that I have PAID for it and I can see the bottom of the goblet bulging out like the lens of a magnifying glass, and that makes me queasy. Probably the anticipated awful thing, whatever it may be, is starting to happen to me already. In this hot white place, enclosed by white hotel walls, I watch the women in their bathing suits and try to forget how stupid everything is. (Nobody's as beautiful as Megan; no one has the class of the Handcuff Queen.) The rest of my life, I know, will be much the same: a uniform magnetic field. I will sit and drink these chemically flavored chemicals called margaritas until I *know* that I am about to be sick; come to think of it, I will do that NOW; this will not be one of those sustained binges in which I keep breaking through and breaking through into new states east of California, as if I were

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falling through layers of ice too thin to bear my weight, having drunk the strength out of them—no, this will not be any such noble thing; but rather a purgation simple—which is all that Riviera margaritas are good for anyhow. In short, I am going to be sick. I want to be, need to be; I welcome the third margarita, the first burning belch, the bubble stuck in my windpipe, gluing lung to lung, the belly-twitchings that wriggle Mickey's big ears derisively against me like melting cocktail stirrers, like the nuptial tubercuels of snakes; this thought certainly makes me sicker as I order another round from Miss Legs (no tip) and drink it down and then the next, which convinces me that there is indeed no difference between Las Vegas and Tijuana; now for Number Five, and everything is empty like Satoko's bed in the Tenderloin beneath which the dust grows higher on the gigantic heart of barbed wire which one of Painter Ben's girlfriends made for him (the night before Satoko left for Japan he brought it by as a farewell gift, and she said thank you and abandoned it); the sixth drink conflates Hawaii with Canada, and the sweetness of the seventh is so successfully disgusting at last that I stand up proud and tall and sneering and I vomit into the pool, just like the ocean puking up its thousands of jellyfish like translucent little abortions when it was misfed, for which Seth's candy bars could never have been enough recompense even though he spent the nethermost nickles in his pocket on them; I lean forward and vomit all over the swimmers and everyone screams and the brownish green slush of margarita-puke begins to diffuse itself gently throughout the pool and I puke again—BLOOD this time, very dark blood; something is stuck very fast in me—oh, I do not *want* it to come up!—but I puke again and feel a human head expelling itself through my throat, and I know that if I had a flashlight and a mirror I would be able to see that wet drowned scalp glistening behind my tonsils, just as a baby's head is crowned in the mother's vagina during the penultimate stage of birth; I am choking and retching and

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finally I vomit Monique out, in little heaves and stages, and her corpse floats face-down in the pool, with a cape of hair swirling around it, and her limp arms stretch out ahead of her, pointing west to San Francisco, so that, as cool as a scholar in the midst of my grief and anger, I deduce that she must have been the Ghost of Magnetism after all; and the beautiful swimmers have rushed out of the pool and are shrieking and shrieking in horror and here comes the bouncer; I am sick again; I have to be, and I vomit up dead white Vera in sad white bits that float and mingle with her lover as they mingled with her inside me; I vomit up the stream of pure water that Martin once gave me, and it splashes into the pool and sullies itself with blood and booze and memory-flesh; it was fresh only inside me. In a series of horrid papery retches I yield up Seth's candy bars at last. I vomit back all the meals that Painter Ben ever gave me, and the hands that Megan never let me kiss; there they float in the pool, with the dead fingers curled, bleeding from their stumps, and it is a wonder that those gracefully tapering fingers of hers didn't choke me as they came up. I upchuck a cup of wine that the Handcuff Queen poured for me once when I visited her in her marbleized beauty parlor; I cough up all the Thanksgiving turkeys that I never had, and they splash into the blue water one by one, floating with beseechingly upraised drumsticks. Now I feel emptier and San Francisco is not pulling me and hurting me quite as much, but there are so many more memories still inside me that must be given back before the compass bearing can be adjusted! and the bouncer is HERE.

You're going to have to leave, sir, he says.

Ohhhhhhhhhhh-KAY! I reply jauntily, snapping my finger in his face. He is a family man; he has a home; he

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won't dare to do anything. He will hush up the fact that I have eaten human flesh.

I walk out into the hot sun, wiping my mouth on my sleeve. My sense of direction is weaker. As Laddie the hobo would say, how *nice* that we get to look at the view!—I wander up and down the Strip and at last find a casino called Golden Memories. —What a *perfect* name, I say to myself. —Here I will enter; here I will have done.

My pockets are bulging with quarters—I am weighed down with change! Everyone from San Francisco is in my pocket. How wearily heavy they are! I must get rid of them. —I rush to the bank of slot machines and no one even looks up and the slot machines are blinking and glowing and chirping and popping with a magnetic flux of at least 937 billion webers per square meter and I close my eyes and spin myself around so that I will be dizzy and not know *right* from *left* from *wrong* and my outflung wrist strikes the corner of a 25¢ machine with a thud that hurts and blood runs down to my hand from a harmless little triangular cut (but although to others I seem unsteady, an increasing steadiness of *perception* comes into play, so that I know I could go on forever, weary, aching, but perfectly alert, ready to sip at still another margarita) and I take out my first quarter, with Margaret's face on it, and she is beautiful and smiling as she was on her thirtieth birthday when there was a surprise party for her in Golden Gate Park and I kiss her cheek but the quarter only tastes like sweat and dirt and tarnished cold metal. With remorse and deepest sorrow, I nudge the quarter into the slot and pull the lever. (None of this is voluntary.) There is a clang, and pictures whirl meaninglessly around behind the tiny rectangular window, halting at last with a display of three not quite identical bottles, probably because Margaret and I once drove up to the

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wine country and tasted three different kinds of Sonoma wine on a humid sunny day when everything smelled like grapes and I thought then that I would keep that day in my heart forever. —Surprise! —Martin's quarter wobbles and trembles on the edge of the slot, but I flick it in and pull the lever, losing him forever with only two stylized roses and a pistol remaining behind the window to remind me of the time he set me up with two women, one after the other, whom I took on shooting dates, and so never saw again. No, they had not cared for me; but Martin had done his best. —Paul and Nancy, when spent, send the picture-symbols clanging and clicking about, stopping at last, with a quietly definitive click, upon a Christmas tree, a blue droplet and a mountain—the tree memorializing, I believe, the forest path that Nancy and I walked along on a summer afternoon when the streams were wide and we both agreed that we were going to live in San Francisco, the blue tear being one of those that ran so soundlessly down Paul's cheek on the night that he and I parted; as for the mountain—what a shame to give up that glorious mountain! White Mountain Peak it was, and Paul and I clambered up it stone by stone from the hot desert through the sandy tree-wastes and the sloping meadows, all the way to its rocky icy shoulder, from which the two of us looked down at the Sierras and the Owens Valley and the whole world green and blue below us; we imagined that we could almost see San Francisco, and we slapped each other's shoulders proudly; —but now, alas, White Mountain Peak is only a stylized purple triangle with a jagged fringe of white—living dead behind that narrow window (in a slot machine memories become cartoons), waiting beside its brother symbols, the droplet and the tree, for the next pull of the lever that will make their relation vanish, and I turn away so that I can see neither mountain nor tree nor drop anymore; I want it that way. I close my eyes; I see circles with crossed lines inside them whirling and

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wheeling in the darkness (a magnetic flux line has no beginning, no end), and a lady pants beside me as she crams *her* quarters desperately in. I gamble away Laddie and Sharie and Painter Ben; but when I try to spend the Handcuff Queen my machine goes *ding-ding-ding-ding-ding!* and the display says BAR BAR BAR and a choking rush of quarters clatters in the pan. There are Paul and Nancy again, frozen-etched smiling and waving on their two-headed quarter; I must say goodbye again now; but happily the other quarters awarded me are new ones, bearing only the blank profile of George Washington. —I move to another machine; I do not want to risk getting any more of my real quarters back. (These alien quarters, they're fine: I can spend them on drinks on the airplane.) —Goodbye, Paul and Nancy! Now I drop Mark Dagger into the slot, and pull the lever, and get two knives and a needle—*ding-clunk!* Dickie yields a knife, a needle and a bottle (but what a pity it was to spend those skinhead quarters; the stern bald profiles were so patriotic, so special); Sheet-Rock Fred scores a BAR BAR BAR again because that was where he used to drink and Seth gives me candy BAR BAR BAR as he did the ocean and my friends are vomited up again and I have one more chance to keep everyone whom I fed into this machine, but I cannot do it. —Seth whirls into the slot never to return. Fred hesitates on the lip of that maw for a moment because his edge is scratched and burred, but I roll him in and the eagle on his back goes whirling and tumbling with outspread wings like Fred sailing to India with one day's supply of food and I pull the lever and the slot machine goes *g-chunk-chunk-chunk!* and comes to rest on a white bottle, a red bottle and a turkey, because over Christmas turkey Sheet-Rock Dave once said to Sheet-Rock Fred I hope I got the right color wine, because you see I'm not a real wine *connoisseur,* and Fred smiled a little and rubbed his beard and said well, Dave, there are only two rules about wine: number one, the color of

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the wine should be the color of the meat; and number two, whatever you do you're going to be a *fool!* —and *anyhow* Dave there's no such thing as a wine connoisseur, because a *connoisseur* is just an *entrepreneur* on a heap of *manure,* since he's just *conning* a *sewer,* don't you see, and a sewer is what most people are! —Marisa and Melissa, Catherine and Ken, Megan and blank Satoko I gamble away, shoveling in a handful of George Washingtons like clods upon the grave, and then I am done—except for Elaine.

The Angel of Happiness

Elaine Suicide often wore fingerless gloves. She had big movie-star eyes and fine brown hair with reddish highlights. When she was bored or sad she put her hand on top of her head and stared into her elbow or somewhere else that nobody including her could see, but we used to draw pictures together because Elaine was always into art of one sort or another, taking photographic self-portraits (Ken let her use his darkroom) and composing Xerox art and drawing herself having her period shaking her pale fists with blood storming down from the black cloud between her legs and blood popping out of her nipples and jagged blood-lightnings flickering in her screaming mouth and black shockwaves streaming out from every part of her like sunlight, and she saved clippings from the *San Francisco Chronicle* about women's sexuality and adored Madonna and for that reason went to see Madonna movies over and over. She took herself very seriously; she made lists of things to do to perfect herself like Stop biting my nails • continue to dance every morning • see movies movies movies • walk the dog when you don't want to • do the dishes when you don't want to • only buy what you need when you need it • decide what it is you want (pertaining to all levels) • draw a design with watercolor ideas

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• begin notes on a very interesting film • stop eating between meals • clear up complexion • always be nice to people on the phone • don't sulk • don't whine • be cool—fire and ice • shave legs and armpits regularly • cry when you feel like suicide is the only answer because crying is better • kiss Mom hello and Elaine made calculations to determine approximately how much time she had left in this world in top form, taking account of her twenty-three-day physical cycle with her peak at day six, her twenty–eight-day emotional cycle with her peak at day seven, her thirty–three-day intellectual cycle with her peak at day eight; and Elaine wrote Figure out days alive: Age × 365 and she thought and added 1 day for each leap year you've been alive and she smoked cigarettes all night lying naked on her bed looking out the window at Sixth Street with its winos sleeping and the financial district's towers and pyramids being cemetery-beautiful in the moonlight and streetlights and all the flat roofs below her scrunching down so that she could look out over the world and she added 1 day for your last birthday and she added the # of days since your last birthday (don't count Feb. 29 if it's there; don't count your birthday; don't count today) and she went through the algorithm and concluded Round this off to a whole # and that's the day of that cycle you're in.

For a while she was reading Goethe, which she pronounced Goath, and I never corrected her because I thought where do I get off telling her how to pronounce the guy's name when I can understand perfectly what she means and anyhow *I* say Chile not Cheelay and Germany not Deutschland and besides old G.'s been dead for hundreds of years so who cares and I hate it when people tell me how to pronounce things, so when Elaine said I think that Goath is so *profound* I just said I agree a *hundred* percent, Elaine; I agree a *thousand* percent—but when

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Elaine found out that it was actually Goethe she was so angry at me that she called me up just to cuss me out.

I'm sorry, I said.

I can't *believe* you'd let me mispronounce it in front of you for *weeks!* stormed Elaine.

Well, I said, I guess I'm just a very conservative person. I would never tell you to change, Elaine, because change of any kind makes me sick to my stomach.

Getting to know Elaine was like listening from start to finish to the Suzanne Vega compact disk that she bought in order to record one particular song onto the soundtrack of her film with maximum fidelity and then Elaine was finished with that compact disk forever because she did not have a compact disk player and never would since she had given up being an Assistant Media Buyer in the advertising office on Market Street and so would *never* have enough money to buy a compact disk player and I listened to the compact disk without knowing which track was the one that Elaine had used because I had moved away from San Francisco, you see, before the film was completed, so I had to listen to each and every song whispering to me so intimately through the headphones about things that I could not understand, not being a woman with big dark eyes that sometimes had circles under them as Elaine's most often did as she sat on her bed glumly smoking cigarettes and I looked at the photo of Suzanne Vega on the cover of the compact disk and looked and looked and *really* looked at it to see if Suzanne Vega's face told me anything about Elaine and it sort of did because I was listening to or had listened to or was about to listen to the song that Elaine had used, the magic key to Elaine Suicide that would explain things about Elaine because Elaine had chosen it just as Suzanne Vega must some-

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how look like her songs and something about her face must correspond to *that* song that explained Elaine and in a way her face was not so different from Elaine's in its quality of entranced distance.

Elaine had a very nice low throaty laugh, and there was nowhere she wouldn't go. Sometimes she kept me company in whore bars. But then the whores stayed away from us because they couldn't understand why Elaine was there and then Elaine was very disappointed.

I cannot recall without pain how Elaine shone so shy and eager around Ken and how he ignored her and Elaine kept smiling at him and asking him how he was or what he was doing or other things which would not require much effort to answer and which would therefore be less likely to irritate Ken and Ken told her to get lost and she would not let the balloon of her desperate faith be punctured and kept smiling because one of the things on her list was • keep smiling, like Ken says • and Ken said is that a pimple on your cheek or is that herpes that is so ugly and Elaine said why do you have to be like that and Ken said shut up you fucking bitch or I'll slam your head against the wall and Elaine's head dropped and Elaine said why do you have to be such an asshole and everyone else pretended that nothing was happening and we all had more beer except for Elaine who kept drinking grapefruit juice and vodka and got very quiet and drunk and Ken left and Ben left and everyone started leaving and I said how long will you be staying Elaine and Elaine said I'll stay here to the end and I said hey Elaine can I put my hand down your dress and Elaine said no way and I said aw just this once and Elaine said all right and so I walked Elaine home and she was crying silently so that I could see the reflections of streetlights and carlights in the tears that streamed so steadily down her cheeks and I said well

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Elaine let me stop and think of some advice to give you while I piss and Elaine laughed a little through her tears and I pissed between the bars of a fence and thought as hard as I could and put my arm around her and when I crossed the wide ribbon of light and noise that was Market Street I said Elaine Ken doesn't love you anymore he loves Satoko but all you need is someone to respect you someone to take care of you you can't live on your own you can't live with someone who depends on you you need someone to depend on someone happy who will make you happy, and a man was sleeping at the bus stop and a man was sleeping in the doorway and a man and woman were sleeping in an alley and I felt so bad for Elaine and wanted so much for Elaine to find someone and I was awake with the controlled weary watchfulness of alcohol that can keep you and fuel you all night if you need it to and I wondered if the busses were still running and when we got to Elaine's house before I could kiss her goodnight she said you can sleep here if you want and my heart started pounding and I said with you? and she said sadly yes we might as well have some fun.

And I thought to myself I'm leaving San Francisco tomorrow and here I am about to fuck Elaine Suicide and why shouldn't I? Aside from the fact that it's not me that she wants to fuck at all, why shouldn't I? Aside from the fact that she might give me some disease, why shouldn't I? Aside from the fact that she won't enjoy it as much as I will and that she's feeling miserable and that by saying yes to her I'm taking advantage of her, why shouldn't I? Why shouldn't I kiss her all over this once and be close to her before she finally does kill herself? Why shouldn't everything be a part of everything for one more night before the translucent base plate must be rotated and the red needle spins as sickeningly as a stomach churning and I don't even know

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the declination anymore? Why shouldn't I love her because she's my friend? And I could think of no reason not to do it, and I knew how nice it was going to be, but even then I had no inkling of what I *really* wanted to do it for.

Elaine's body was so light and lovely and perfect. As soon as we were in the bedroom I took off my clothes; I started pulling her clothes off so eagerly; I kissed her and kissed her. —Take it easy, laughed Elaine. —She fit just right in my hands. Everything about her tasted good. Elaine said you know we really ought to use a rubber and I said oh let's not and I stuck it in. It was perfect. It was still perfect in the morning even though neither of us had slept much and there were bluish circles under both of our eyes and Elaine lay puffing cigarette smoke down at the dawn but we went out and I bought her breakfast at the Mexican coffee shop around the corner and I was so happy that I could barely eat and on the street I saw a pimp I knew who said to me hey bro 'sup? and I said just keeping *this* lady company *if* you know what I mean and I think that you do and Elaine laughed and laughed and it was very sunny in San Francisco and the birds were singing and it got warmer and warmer until the sun was so bright and I felt brave at last and Elaine was running down the streets with me, holding my hand, and I did not want to say good-bye; I could not believe that my feet were still on the ground, I was so happy. But later Elaine said oh shit I forgot I'm ovulating. I think I'm going to get pregnant. I really think so.

And I was filled with joy. It all made sense: the sweetness and perfection of her had been just right because she was ready to make babies. And I said if you want to have a baby you go ahead and have it; if you want an abortion I'll come back to town and pay for half of it and

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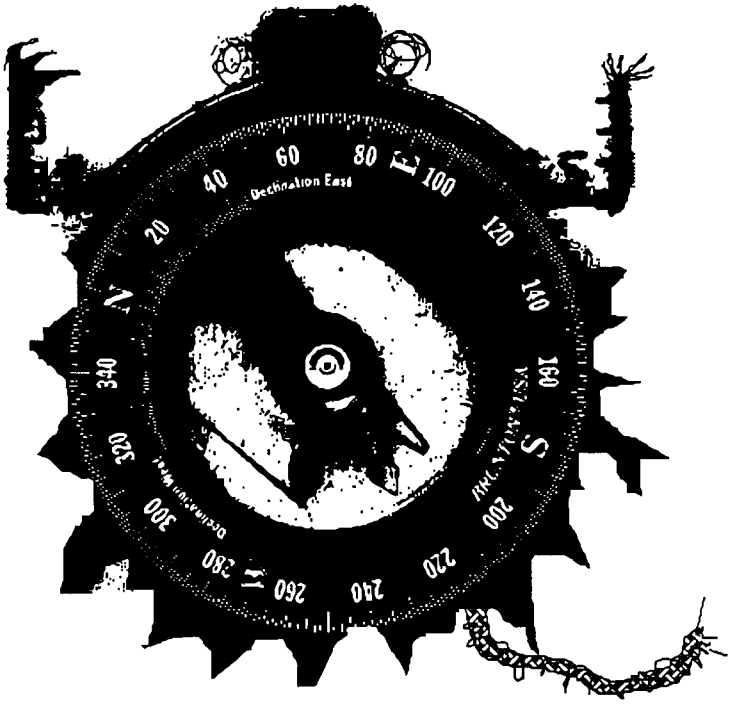
hold your hand while you're having it and Elaine said you're so sweet and I kept thinking yes—if she has an abortion I'll be able to come back to town and be with her and so I won't have left San Francisco yet and if she has the baby I'll still be here, too, growing and dreaming inside of Elaine.



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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

FICTION

William S. Burroughs is the author of twelve books, most recently *The Western Lands.* The piece in this issue is taken from *The Cat Inside,* forthcoming from Viking.

Günter Grass's first novel, *The Tin Drum,* was published in 1958. His numerous works of fiction and nonfiction include, most recently, *The Rat* (1986) and *Show Your Tongue* (1989) Among his many literary awards are the 1965 Georg Büchner Prize and the 1977 Carl von Ossietzky Medal. He is an honorary member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. "The String Bag" is excerpted from *The Call of the Toad,* forthcoming from Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. **Ralph Manheim** is a leading translator of cantemporary German and French fiction into English.

Denis Johnson lives near Good Grief, Idaho. His first collection of poetry, *The Incognito Lounge,* was selected for the 1982 National Poetry Series. He is the author of four novels: *Angels* (1983), *Fiskadoro* (1985), *The Stars at Noon* (1986) and, most recently, *Resuscitation of a Hanged Man* (1991). In 1987 he received the Whiting Writers' Award for excellence in fiction and poetry.

Lorrie Moore lives in Madison, Wisconsin. She is the author of *Anagrams* and two collections of short stories, *Self Help* and *Like Life.* She has also edited an anthology of contemporary stories about childhood, *I Know Some Things.*

William T. Vollmann's most recent novel, *Fathers and Crows,* is forthcoming from Viking. *An Afghanistan Picture Show,* a work of nonfiction illustrated with his photographs, was published last summer by Farrar, Straus & Giroux.

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POETRY

Nin Andrews's poetry has appeared in *Exquisite Corpse, Michigan Quarterly Review* and *Denver Quarterly.*

Bruce Beasley's first book of poetry is called *Spirituals.* His poems have appeared in *The Hudson Review, The Southern Review, The Yale Review* and other journals. He will be teaching at West Washington University this fall.

David Bottoms's poems have appeared in many magazines, including *The Atlantic Monthly, The New Yorker* and *Harpers,* as well as in numerous anthologies. His first book, *Shooting Rats at the Bibb County Dump,* won the 1979 Walt Whitman Award of the Academy of American Poets. His most recent book is *Easter Weekend,* published by Houghton Mifflin.

Amy Clampitt's fourth book of poetry is *Westward.* She has also written a collection of essays, *Predecessors, Et Cetera.*

Toi Derricotte is the author of three books of poetry: *The Empress of the Death House, Natural Birth* and *Captivity.* She is an associate professor in the creative writing program at the University of Pittsburgh.

Stephen Dobyns's twenty books of fiction and poetry include the novel *After/Shocks/Near/Escapes* and, most recently, *Body Traffic,* a collection of poems. He is the director of the creative writing program at Syracuse University.

Stephen Dunn's eighth and most recent book of poetry is entitled *Landscape at the End of the Century.*

Laura Fargas's work has appeared in *The Atlantic, The Georgia Review* and *Poet Lore,* and she has received the New York Times Company Foundation Residency Award from Yaddo for 1992. She lives and practices law in Washington, D.C.

Marilyn Hacker is the author of seven books of poetry, including, *Going Back to the River.* She received the National Book Award in 1975 for her first collection, *Presentation Piece.*

Rachel Hadas's most recent book of poetry, *Mirrors of Astonishment*, was published this fall by Rutgers University Press. Hadas, who is a professor of English at Rutgers, was a Guggenheim Fellow in 1988–89 and won The Academy of Arts and Letters literature award in 1990.

Zbigniew Herbert was born in Lvov, Poland in 1924. **John** and **Bogdana Carpenter**'s translation of Herbert's *Still Life with a Bridle* was published by Ecco Press last fall. Bogdana Carpenter is a professor in the Slavic department of the University of Michigan. John Carpenter is currently writing a book on the literature of World War II. They won the Witter-Bynner Translation Award in 1979 for *The Selected Poems of Zbigniew Herbert.*

Jane Hirshfield's most recent books are *Of Gravity and Angels* and a

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co-translation, *The Ink Dark Moon.* New poems are forthcoming in *The Atlantic, Poetry* and *ZYZZYVA.*

Jovan Hristić is a major contemporary Serbian poet, playwright and literary essayist. A native of Belgrade, born in 1933, he studied philosophy and has begun publishing new works after a hiatus of many years. His translator, **Charles Simic**, has four books coming out this year, including *Hotel Insomnia* (a poetry collection), a study of the art of Joseph Cornell and two books of translations.

James Lasdun is the author of two books of stories, *Delirium Eclipse* and *Three Evenings,* and a book of poetry, *A Jump Start.* He teaches creative writing at Bennington College.

J.D. McClatchy's most recent collection is entitled *The Rest of the Way.* He was awarded the annual Fellowship of The Academy of American Poets in 1991. He is the editor of *The Yale Review.*

Sandra McPherson's sixth collection of poems, *The God of Indeterminacy,* is forthcoming from University of Illinois Press next spring. She is a professor of English at the University of California at Davis.

Lisel Mueller is the author of five volumes of poetry, including *Waving From Shore.* Her latest book is a translation of *Circle's Mountain,* a book of stories by Marie Luise Kuschnitz.

Mary Oliver's *New and Selected Poems* was published by Beacon Press. She is currently the Banister Writer in Residence at Sweet Briar College in Virginia.

Agnieszka Osiecka lives in Warsaw, Poland. She has published six volumes of poetry, most recently, *Singing Sands.* Her translator, **Michael Kott**, has translated other works from Polish that have been published in *The New York Times Book Review, The New York Times Magazine, National Geographic* and *Formations.*

Jeremy Reed was born in Jersey, Channel Islands and lives in London. His publications include six novels and two books of poetry, *Nineties* and *Red Haired Android.*

Patricia Smith is the author of two books of poetry, *Life According to Motown* and *Big Towns, Big Talk,* published by Zoland Books. She is an arts and entertainment critic for the *Boston Globe.*

Richard Tillinghast is the author of five books of poems. *The Stonecutter's Hand,* forthcoming from David R. Godine in 1993, will include "Aubade." Other poems from the collection are appearing in *The Atlantic Monthly, The Hudson Review* and the 1992 *Best American Poetry.*

Chase Twichell's most recent book is *Perdido.* She is coeditor of *The Practice of Poetry: Writing Exercises From Poets Who Teach.* She teaches at Princeton University.

Susan Wheeler lives in New York City. Her poems have appeared in *New American Writing, Witness, Thirteenth Moon, Shenandoah* and the 1988 and 1991 editions of *The Best American Poetry.*

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FEATURE

Pietro Citati was born in Florence in 1930 and grew up in Turin. He has been a professor of Italian language and literature at the Ludwig-Maximillian University in Munich. Citati has been the literary critic for the newspaper *Il Giorno* and, for fifteen years, *Corriere della Sera.* Since 1988 he has been the literary critic at *La Repubblica.* His books include the biographies *Goethe, Kafka* and *Tolstoy,* and the forthcoming memoir *Story: Happy at the Beginning but Then Very Sad and Tragic.* His translator, **Raymond Rosenthal,** received the Present Tense Award for his translation of Primo Levi's *Periodic Table.* His numerous other translations include that of Citati's *Goethe*, for which he was nominated for the National Book Award.

INTERVIEWS

Jonathan Dee (Grace Paley interview) is the author of *The Lover of History.* His second novel, *The Liberty Campaign,* is forthcoming from Doubleday in 1993. He lives in New York City and is a former senior editor of *The Paris Review.*

Barbara Jones (Paley interview) is a fiction writer and free-lance essayist living in New York City. Her work has been published in numerous journals and newspapers. She is a former editor of *Grand Street.*

Larissa MacFarquhar (Paley interview) is an editorial assistant at *Spy.*

Damien Pettigrew (Italo Calvino interview) is a Canadian freelance journalist and documentary filmmaker living and working in Paris. He has published a series of interviews with European writers in *Le Monde* and is presently directing a ninety-minute documentary about Federico Fellini for release in 1993. Portions of the Calvino interview were taken from his 1983 documentary, *Italo Calvino,* and are used with permission. © Damien Pettigrew and Italo Calvino.

William Weaver (Calvino interview) lives in Italy. For many years he has been the arts correspondent for the *Financial Times* (London) and has published several books about Italian opera, as well as a biography of Eleonora Duse. He has translated works by a number of Italian writers, among them Italo Calvino, Carlo Emilio Gadda, Umberto Eco, Giorgio Bassani, Pier Paolo Pasolini and Elsa Morante. His edition of the correspondence of Giuseppe Verdi and Arrigo Boito will be published next year by the University of Chicago Press.

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ART

Vija Celmins was born in Riga, Latvia, in 1939, and lives in New York. Her paintings, drawings and prints have been shown at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art and the David McKee Gallery, New York.

Craig Roper was born in 1955, in Lincoln, Nebraska, where he still lives. His work has been exhibited recently at Bess Cutler Gallery, New York; Asher Faure Gallery, Los Angeles and Museo di Fotografia, Brescia, Italy.

Kiki Smith was born in Nuremberg, Germany, in 1954, and lives in New York. Her sculpture and drawings have been exhibited recently at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Amsterdam, The Museum of Modern Art, New York and Fawbush Gallery, New York.

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Patricia Storace, the poetry editor of this magazine since 1988, has resigned her position to work in Greece on a non-fiction book on that country which she describes as being the kind of survey Luigi Barzini did with *The Italians*. She will be missed. Her tenure as poetry editor has been especially notable for the many translations she published—from Hungarian to Japanese. Almost a third of the magazine was her fiefdom—an average of nearly twenty poets an issue, many of them published for the first time. She is particularly proud of publishing David Mamet's first poem, Georges Perec's work, Tim Dlugos's extraordinary AIDS poem "D-9" about a dying friend (Dlugos himself died shortly after) and her Bernard Conners Poetry Prize selections, including Jorie Graham, Christopher Logue and Donald Hall. In the tradition of this magazine she has been a great friend to poets.

We are fortunate to be able to welcome as her successor the distinguished poet, translator and teacher, Richard Howard. His selections will appear in the next issue.

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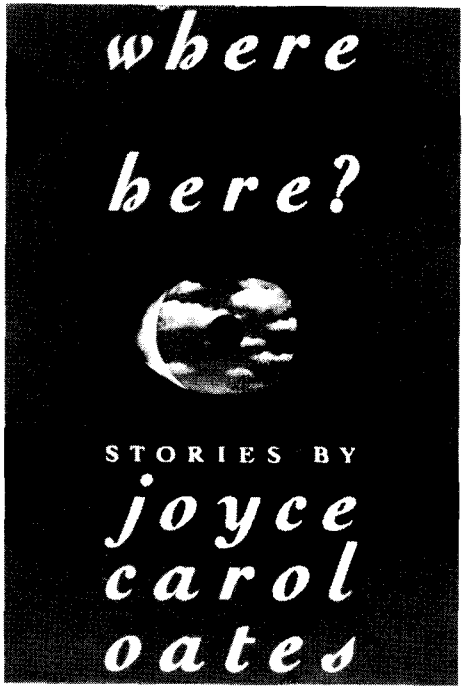

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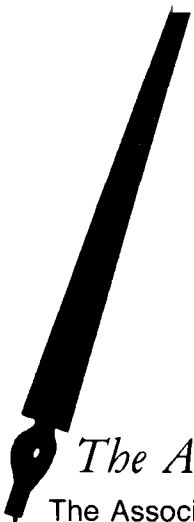

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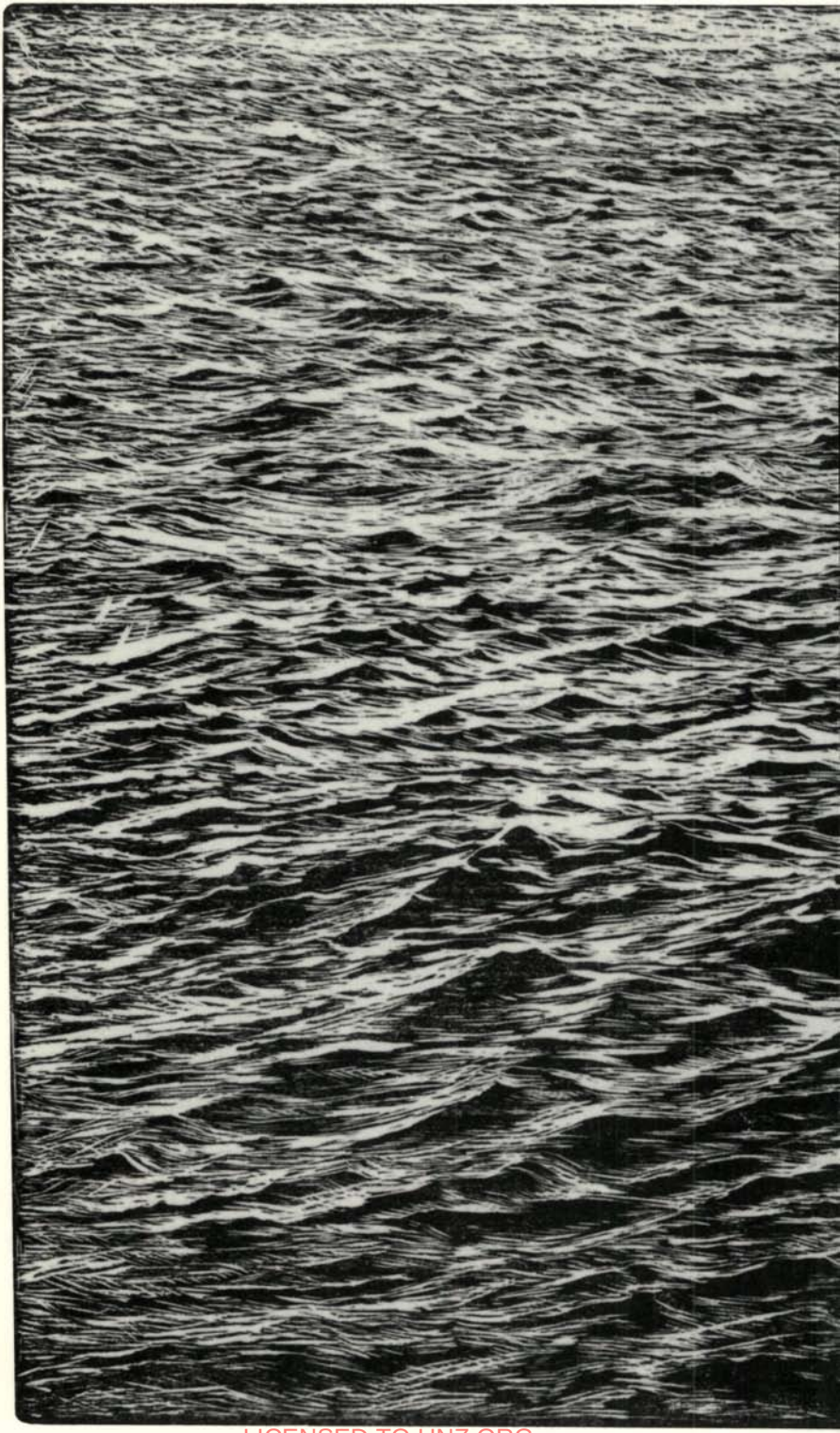

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